A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CORPORATE EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CHANGES IN WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Alan Thomas Harrison, M.A.; B.A.

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This work or any part thereof has not previously been presented in any form to the University or to any other body whether for the purposes of assessment, publication or for any other purpose. Save for any express acknowledgements, references and/or bibliographies cited in the work, I confirm that the intellectual content of the work is the result of my own efforts and of no other person.

Signature: Alan T Harrison

Date: 2nd August, 1998

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Abstract

While substantial literatures exist in the areas of modern management practice in general, corporate communication in particular, and the labour process, these bodies of literature hardly seem to overlap. Detailed analysis of the language used in corporate communication, and of its interpretation by its target audience of employees seems not to exist. This thesis is a modest attempt to remedy this defect, bringing to bear the methodology of critical linguistics to analyse the language used in samples of corporate communication, and using focus groups to investigate its interpretation by employees.

Based on case studies in three companies, the thesis examines the forms of corporate communication which are present in each company, finding some evidence that "management fads" exist, and that quality circles in particular seem to have gone out of fashion.

The linguistic content of specific examples of written communication is examined in some detail. Linguistic forms are identified which appear to be intended to disguise underlying conflict. In the course of this part of the work, I propose a modest extension to linguistic understanding of the use of the first person plural.

In focus groups of employees, I investigate employee understanding of their employers' communication, and specifically their decoding of the items of written communication which I had analysed. I examine in particular detail the question of whether employees have an understanding of the linguistic forms used in corporate communication. I find evidence for a fairly sophisticated "folk linguistics" enabling oppositional decoding of the messages contained in corporate communication.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This research, funded for three years by a bursary from the University of Wolverhampton, arose from my previous experience as a senior trade union representative from 1987 until 1993. In September 1987 I had become senior representative at what was then GEC Telecommunications, Coventry, and I continued in this capacity until I was made redundant in November 1993. In the meantime, the company had merged with Plessey Telecommunications to form GPT, and a period of rapid change had ensued. This was usually justified by management in terms of technological advance but also as a response to a need to compete, especially with Japanese companies, whose methods were often held up as an example for GPT to follow. It was apparent in conversations with representatives from other plants within GPT and with colleagues from other companies, that management was pushing an agenda of change, often based on similar premises, and that this change was not always beneficial to employees.

Management communication was geared towards persuading employees of the benefits of the changes which management sought to introduce, but it was evident that, even in the GPT Coventry factories with their relatively weak trade union tradition, employees did not necessarily accept the messages conveyed by management communication. Indeed, employees, including non-members, from time to time telephoned the union office to complain of inaccuracy in management communications, or to draw senior representatives' attention to developments which they believed to indicate a threat to employment security. Thus, the absence of overt conflict in the form of strikes did not necessarily indicate that workers were accepting the message of corporate communications.

Responding to management communication with appropriate union leaflets and the dissemination of information to representatives was an important part of the senior representatives' duties. This had frequently involved the "translation" of

corporate language into "plain English". It had been apparent that many workers had in any event got an ear for "management bullshit" and were suspicious of corporate warm words or euphemism, which often clashed with their lived experience.

This research has offered an opportunity to pursue this interest in a more systematic way, allowing a more rigorous analysis of management texts than was possible in the day-to-day work of a trade union office, and a more focused examination of employee decoding of texts.

It was my intention from the beginning of the research to use GPT as a case study, examining both Coventry and the traditionally much more militant Liverpool site. The other companies used as case studies were BT and the Royal Mail. Fortuitously, the three companies are connected. BT is the main British customer of GPT, and BT and the Royal Mail were formerly parts of the Post Office (British PTT). The same trade union, the Communications Workers Union, organises employees in both the Royal Mail and BT, with extremely high union densities in the relevant grades. GPT demonstrates a typical manufacturing pattern, with several unions represented in each workplace, and differing union densities in various grades, with manual workers being most highly and engineers and managers least highly unionised. Thus the companies which formed the case study were all engaged in the communications industry and covered a wide range of occupations from semi-skilled manual workers to graduate engineers and managers, with major differences in the level and vigour of trade union organisation. (1)

The questions which I sought to address were as follows:

1. What were the forms of communication and employee involvement within the three companies?

Was there any pattern of forms of communication which might indicate changing management fads, as suggested in some of the existing literature? Was there any evidence that forms of communication varied with the type of workforce being addressed? This part of the work, based on existing literature, contemporary press and broadcast reports, interviews with union officials and other available material, also yielded important contextual information for the other research questions.

2. What were the linguistic forms used in management communication?

Based on close linguistic analysis of specific examples of written corporate communication, this part of the research examined whether there were any contradictions or conflicts apparent in such communication, for example between potentially conflicting management objectives. Did any specific linguistic patterns occur in corporate communication - was there, as some employees would assert, a "management language"? Were any such linguistic forms used to disguise conflict? Did linguistic form vary with the target audience?

3. How did employees decode corporate communication?

Did they broadly accept and act upon its message, or did they reject it? Were they willing or grudging participants in exercises such as team briefings? Did employees perceive conflict or contradiction in corporate communication? If they did, to what extent was their perception based on an understanding of the linguistic form which the communication took? In the case of GPT, would there be any major difference in perception between the Liverpool site and Coventry sites, perhaps contributing to the relative militancy of the former and the quiescence of the latter?

The structure of this work is as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews existing management literature in general, and literature dealing specifically with corporate communication. It also refers briefly to some literature in the area of labour studies. While providing useful information for my work, I note that the literature is notable for lack of mutual reference between these strands, with authors in one field rarely referring to the others. I suggest that management communication texts in particular are very reluctant to refer explicitly to any conflict of interest between management and employees, although the resolution of such conflict in favour of management very obviously underlies much of this literature. I suggest that some light may be cast on these bodies of literature by the application of some findings of critical linguists, some of whose work I review at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 3, I define the methodology used in the current work. The use of focus groups and the application of critical linguistic analysis is explained in this chapter.

Chapter 4 is the first of three case studies dealing with specific companies, in this case GPT. The same basic format is followed in all three chapters. After a general introduction, the methods of communication used within the company are explored, based on available information and interviews with senior representatives. Specific items of written communication are then analysed, using the insights of critical linguistics. The chapter concludes with an examination of employees' reaction to corporate communication, including the two items analysed above, in focus groups. In this case, because of different trade union traditions, focus groups were held in both Coventry and Liverpool.

Chapter 5 similarly treats the Royal Mail case study, with a single focus group in this case. Chapter 6, based on BT, is the shortest of the case studies, including only one item of corporate communication.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings from the three case studies and proposes some areas for further research.

Note:

(1) Ownership of GPT changed as this thesis was being prepared for final submission, with GEC buying out the 40% holding of Siemens. The situation described in the remainder of this thesis is that which prevailed at the time of the research, namely that the company was jointly owned by GEC and Siemens.

Chapter 2 The Problem of Communication

2.1 Introduction

In recent years, companies in Britain, and indeed in most developed capitalist economies, have attributed growing importance to communication with their employees. This was succinctly summed up by a personnel manager interviewed in the course of the present research as a move away from a situation in which it was considered "right to keep people in the dark" towards greater openness. Among other reasons for this change of attitude, he mentioned the possibility that "if it is necessary to break bad news, it doesn't come out of the blue and it isn't a total shock." Here, perhaps, is the basic contradiction which underlies corporate communication: that the communication seeks to gain the commitment of employees to the organization, but the organization may find it necessary to dispense with their services.

Is this potential conflict of interest visible within the existing literature on corporate communication? Conversely, do authors dealing with management and the labour process in general accord attention to the role of communication within the process? It is with these questions in mind that I turn to a review of existing literature.

2.2 Management and the labour process

In the last twenty years, British industry has felt itself to be facing increased competition. In the telecommunications field, for example, Britain's share of the world market for telecommunications equipment has fallen from approximately 25% of the world total in the immediate post-war period to around 3% today. In this field and also in the aerospace industry, Britain's home market is no longer large enough to bear the huge costs of research and development of new products, so that British companies have had to find "partners". The automotive industry has also seen British companies merge with American and European

former competitors, as well as substantial inward investment by Japanese companies such as Toyota and Nissan. Government crises in the 1970s were followed by policies aimed at increasing competitiveness, as instanced for example in the Department of Trade and Industry Report, *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* (1995). New working practices have featured in these policies, perhaps being accepted somewhat uncritically as mutually beneficial to employers and employees. Much of this response has been faddish, with business books advising managers on currently fashionable practices which may be presented as a panacea, encouraging managers to mimic the methods of successful managers. It may be argued that the moves towards "leaner" structures prey on vulnerable employees.

Huczynski (1993) examines the business book boom of the nineteen-eighties. His presentation is often leavened with humour, as when he suggests (1993: p 60) that a factor in the success of management books is the use of

> 'magic words' ... which required managers to use a little (although not a great deal) of effort to 'unwrap' the idea-parcel.... Hence a degree of mystification is in order, and is achieved by the use of either acronyms or relabelling.

Huczynski notes the manner in which "the capitalist system rejected any questioning of either the basic terms on which the management of the organization was conducted, or the political disposition in which it existed" (1993: p 7). He claims as consequences of this attitude the appeal of theories which stress cost-free elements like morale (1993: p 26) and the abandonment of job enrichment programmes if they led to demands for increased worker control over the work process.

Huczynski detects an atmosphere of "religious conversion" in some "guru" seminars (1993: p 199 ff.), with the chanting of quasi-liturgical responses, and

notes the ability of successive management fads to co-exist despite apparently contradictory teachings. (1993: Chapter 8) He ascribes this situation to an atmosphere of crisis, brought about by fear of Japanese competition, and to a desire to impress customers, for example by introducing quality circles so that the customer does not see the company *not* having them. Among individual managers, he cites as reasons for the succession of fads the desire to be seen as a champion of new ideas; trying to keep one jump ahead of subordinates who have "wised up" to the previous management stunt, and the reduction of management boredom, stimulated on the supplier side, perhaps, by a planned obsolescence of ideas!

A similar view of "contradictory fads and fashions" is apparent in an article by Simon Caulkin in the *Observer* (21 July 1996). Caulkin claims that business re-engineering and total quality management are "running out of steam", and that "As for empowerment and teamwork, to many employees they just look like a new version of a much older tactic - more for less." Like Huczynski, Caulkin sees management authors looking for new ideas as old one lose their popularity. In a later article (*Observer* 11 January 1998), Caulkin addresses the problem of the clash between companies' desire to gain the commitment of their employees and their perceived need to gain efficiencies, perhaps involving the reduction of the number of employees and more intensive work for those who are retained.

In the nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, a major concern of European and North American business has been competition from Japanese companies. Their growth, their market success, and indeed their dominance in some sectors, such as cameras, home electronics and motorcycles, has led to interest in the way in which Japanese companies work, and attempts to emulate their methods, in whole or in part, in the hope that companies following their methods may be equally successful. The Japanese experience has been seen to have rather more

substance than some of the fads described by Huczynski. Effective communication is seen as one of the hallmarks of this approach to business.

Some doubt has arisen, however, about how far Japanese managerial techniques can be used outside the particular economic system and culture of Japan. Some methods are rarely used outside Japan, most notably "lifetime employment". (This concept is more accurately called "long term employment", with employees being assured continued employment until retiring age, and has, in fact, come under attack in Japan itself in recent years.) The system of "nominication" described by Okada (1984) would be inconceivable in a European firm. This hybrid word, formed from the root of "nomimasu" (to drink) and "communication", describes the "communication by drinking" which engages many Japanese "salarymen" until midnight in drinking sessions which would probably mean referral to an alcohol counsellor for a British executive. Other, less extreme, examples can be found of Japanese practices which are quietly discarded by European and North American emulators.

The question of "Japanization" - the adoption, in whole or in part, of methods associated with Japanese companies - has therefore become a major area for debate in the 1980s and 1990s. However, some features regarded as typically Japanese were observed as long ago as 1936 by Ernest Pickering. In a paper given at the conference on Contemporary Japanese Studies in Social Science held in Berlin in December 1995, Banno says (1995: p 14) that Pickering:

> rather objectively analysed Japanese technological innovation and rationalisation of industrial organizations. For the first time in modern Japanese history, a British (*sic*) praised Japanese light industries as being more rational than British ones.

Banno then directly quotes Pickering:

> There is not so great a gulf fixed between the operatives and the managerial staff as in other countries. The standard of living is much the

> same for all ... the houses may be different in size, but not so different as to place them in different worlds, ... For the most part the salaries are modest enough to keep the staff and the operatives in a sympathetic understanding of each other's needs.

Pickering appears to have been a prophet without honour in his own country. His work is not cited in the British Library on-line catalogue, and Banno believes that most copies were bought by the Japanese government (conversation with author).

It is also important to bear in mind that the "Japanese model" is not static. Lean production is regarded by many business authors as a major achievement of Japanese companies. However, Ikeda argues in another paper given at the conference (1995: pp 2-3):

> What I can say is that current Japanese auto industry as well as electronic equipment industry have just set their feet on the starting line in the competition of lean production system in its true meaning. From this view point, it might not be a rational thing to debate on the validity of Japanese production system based on the kind of lean production adopted at the time of Japanese bubble economy using it as a yardstick.

Ikeda envisages the possibility of a 30% cost reduction in the Japanese motor industry. Among possible consequences of such a reduction, he believes that:

> a situation of new lean production will emerge in Japan, which will increase again the gap with the U.S. and European auto manufacturers, who reportedly have been picking up. (p 18)

Ikeda raises an important caveat in reminding us that "Japanization" is unfinished business.

The bilingual work by Okada (1984), written in collaboration with Goalstone, who provides the English translation on facing pages of the original Japanese text, states its purpose in the opening sentence of the introduction: "The primary purpose of the book is to explain plainly how Japanese companies work." It has two target audiences: "foreign visitors to Japanese companies and Japanese

executives and managers who have to explain their management practices in English." The work is written from a middle-management perspective, and is a reasonably objective, if bland, description of the way in which Japanese companies work, explaining in a series of numbered paragraphs features of Japanese business such as the role of managers, the semi-formal communication network, *nemawashi* and *ringi*, job rotation, quality circles, lifetime employment and company unions. Importantly, Okada gives more prominence to the role of the communication process in achieving worker consent than do many American and European commentators. He does refer (1984: pp 123 ff.) to Japanese companies' reaction to the need for "drastic change", but does so largely by painting a picture of benevolent companies resorting to dismissal only as a last resort, and seeking to diversify into growing areas of business or find work (even pulling weeds in the brewery yard!) for employees who could not be more gainfully employed.

However, the success of Japanese management methods in Japan is questioned by the report carried out by International Survey Research Limited in 1995, entitled *Attitudes of Japanese Employees: Some surprises and some explanations*. This demonstrates that "Japanese employees have more negative reactions to their work situation than their counterparts in other countries." (ISR 1995a) The report suggests seven reasons for this result.

1. The survey constitutes a safety valve in a society in which "suffering without complaint is a virtue" and in which companies "have a low tolerance for failure".
2. The result may reflect higher expectations of job satisfaction by Japanese employees, and consequently greater disappointment if these expectations are not met.

3. "Lifetime employment" means that dissatisfied workers do not leave, thus preventing "natural selection over time of the employees who feel favourably towards the company".
4. Dissatisfaction of young employees who would be "high flyers" elsewhere with the Japanese system of progress by seniority.
5. Coupled with point 4, a narrowing of promotion opportunities as corporate growth slows down.
6. Younger Japanese employees are moving towards western "individualism" and a work-style which "as yet is neither encouraged nor even accepted at the more senior echelons of Japanese society".
7. Concerns about security engendered by increased pressure for productivity and Japanese overseas investment.

In examining workplace relations in Japanese transplants, Womack and his colleagues (1990) have produced an influential work about the "Japanese" manufacturing system. They are enthusiastic about the economic success of Japanese companies in Japan and overseas, but their attention to workers' concerns is meagre. One is reminded of the French novelist's description of a busy sacristan hurrying across a cathedral, and finding time for "the transverse genuflexion of piety in a hurry". Womack and his colleagues do refer to the importance of lifetime employment in securing the loyalty of Japanese workers to their company and their extreme commitment to work, but find time only for a "transverse genuflexion" to workers' interests.

A valuable recent contribution has been made by the collection of essays on the Japanization debate edited by Elger and Smith (Elger & Smith 1994). In their introduction (Elger & Smith 1994a), the editors review some of the existing literature, criticising Womack and his colleagues, among others, for their "dependence upon one pivotal contrast, between an old and outdated production

paradigm - mass production - and a new and progressive paradigm - lean or innovation-mediated production - which stands on the other side of a qualitative divide". (1994a in Elger & Smith 1994: p 4). They suggest that "the rhetoric of Japanization" may be used "as an ideological justification for an agenda of changes which often owes little to established Japanese ways of working." (1994: p 6) They go on to raise questions about how widely typically "Japanese" concepts such as "just-in-time" have been disseminated in Japan itself. They note that Japanese investment in newly industrialising countries seeks to take advantage of cheap wages, while that in Europe or North America is aimed at securing a share of local markets. They observe "clustering" of Japanese inward investment, often in depressed areas or new towns in Europe and in rural areas in America, and that Japanese transplants are typically assembly-only operations, whose local content has low added value.Elger and Smith believe that "Japanization" is not a straightforward concept, which is why they have used the term with a question mark in the book's title.

Elger and Smith begin their own contribution to the volume (1994b):

> Our argument is that practices identified with Japan are simultaneously the embodiment of general economic efficiencies, culturally specific institutional supports and dominant best practices of a powerful economy. (1994; p 31)

They discern three approaches to Japanization in the literature (1994: pp 37 ff.):

1. Japanization as a "whole package". This, they believe, is quantitative, counting Japanese practices and comparing them with the "whole package":
2. Dual Japanization, which they believe sees Japanese industry in terms of two ideal types - large and small firms - with the "rest of the world" as part of the periphery, exhibiting characteristics of smaller Japanese companies;
3. Disaggregated Japanization. This tendency, they believe, sees Japanese overseas investment as similar to that of other, non-Japanese companies,

taking advantage of local conditions, such as the availability of non-union labour in the United States of America.

They suggest that, with so many different views, caution needs to be exercised about the whole idea of Japanization.

Elger and Smith sound a note of caution about assuming that there is just one model of practice in Japanese companies and about accepting the benign nature of "Toyotism", pointing out that just-in-time and quality circles accompanied work intensification at Toyota. They draw attention to the importance of an insecure periphery in cushioning tenured employees of large Japanese companies from market fluctuations.

Elger and Smith go on to look at "adopters" - those foreign companies which have adopted Japanese practices - and Japanese transplants, particularly those in Britain. They see adopters filtering Japanese practices through their own experience, and suggest that:

> British firms, for example, saw the non-union or single union deals, flexibility, group working, attacks on rigid job territories, and so on, as old battles which were given a new legitimation through arguments about the need to keep up with Japanese standards. (1994: p 46)

Similarly, they see the practices of Japanese transplants as being shaped by the environment in the host country.

In common with most western commentators on the phenomenon of Japanization, Elgar and Smith do not examine the role of communication in Japanese companies' quest for commitment and contentment among their workforce, which had assumed so pivotal a role in Okada's study, cited above. Similarly, the work by Garrahan and Stewart, to which I shall now turn, has little

to say about internal communication, while acknowledging the importance of externally focused communication in establishing a company's image.

Garrahan and Stewart (1992) examine the opening of the Nissan plant in Sunderland after heavy lobbying by central and local government. They draw attention (1992: pp 50 ff.) to "Nissan's dominance over the information flow regarding its development and impact on the local economy", including a lack of openness about the scale of the operation, and the pretence that progress to stage two depended on workforce co-operation. The company presented a benevolent image of itself as a provider of work, rather than as "a consumer of public subsidy or as the multinational extractor of surplus capital for re-export to the home base in Japan". Essentially the North East remained a "branch plant economy" with limited Nissan impact on skills.

Garrahan and Stewart are unimpressed with Nissan's claims about training and multiskilling, seeing the company as training people only in a narrow repertoire of tasks. They regard the quality control process, generating individualism in seeing other workers as customers, as a part of effective union exclusion. "Nissan has nothing against trade unions, except where they wield influence." (1992: p 67) They note that Nissan vehicles were not particularly highly rated by consumer magazines, and argue that "quality" at Nissan is "the pursuit of control and persistent disempowerment through the measurement of individual workers' performance".

This serves to illustrate a point which is often missed in the enthusiastic "Japanization" literature: people working in industry can be seen to have different interests. Hyman's analysis (1985: p 102) puts it like this:

> The superficial equality of buyer and seller conceals underlying inequalities of market power.... This is particularly true of the labour market, where the employer represents the concentrated power of capital

> whereas workers participate in the employment contract as vulnerable individuals.

Hyman, Garrahan and Stewart usefully draw attention to the role of management and to underlying tension in the relationships of the workplace. This tension, and the ambiguous nature of some new management techniques, underlie Wilkinson and Willmott's collection of essays (1995), which examines the question of quality. The editors point out in their introduction to the volume that "quality" is not used in the everyday sense of the word, but in the special sense of consistent conformity with standards. Once again, while management's role in TQM is to persuade employees to police themselves and to commit themselves to the employer's goals, the treatment of the mechanics of communication by which this goal is to be achieved is meagre.

Like Huczynski, whose reference to the quasi-religious nature of some management literature was noted above, Wilkinson and Willmott draw attention to the "evangelical" tone of quality literature, excluding what does not conform to the faith. Regarding the acceptance of TQM as universally benevolent, they question its scope, suggesting that it could not be used to get rid of the management, or even to agree to do less work for lower wages. They question whether it could be used for anything other than what have formerly been the duties of supervisors.

Among the essayists, Tuckman (1995, in ed. Wilkinson & Willmott 1995, Ch. 2) sees TQM as the "culmination" of the degradation of work, citing a chemical company manager who says, "We've deskilled the workforce so much that we now have to give them something to think about." He argues that TQM is "concerned with the subordination of workers' subjectivity" and that it legitimates managers as "arbiters of quality", and cites a 1991 TGWU report on

the "real" meaning of quality in TQM - "complete flexibility and absence of opposition to management's goals".

In the same volume of essays, McArdle and her colleagues (1995, in ed. Wilkinson & Willmott 1995, Ch. 6) argue that "empowerment" may actually disempower workers, resulting in "employees becoming morally bound to a system of management which enhances their own exploitation" (1995: p 161).

The study by Roberts and Corcoran-Nantes (1995, in ed. Wilkinson & Willmott 1995, Ch. 8) is based in part on two plants of a major telecommunications manufacturer, easily identifiable as my former employer, GPT. The study began in 1989, when the "demographic timebomb" - a shortage of suitable young recruits - was feared. They found no skill shortages in the companies they studied, and reached "more plausible hypotheses" around an over-skilled, under-employed workforce.

There had been severe job cuts (from 13,000 to less than 4,000 in one of the telecommunications plants), which was not associated with any loss of business. The researchers felt that the quality drive was "laying a benign veneer" over work intensification. Training was linked with quality, but Roberts and Corcoran-Nantes found that training provided little opportunity for career progression, with consequent employee dissatisfaction. Much "new" training was a "bureaucratisation of what had previously been a less formal process", with a "proliferation" of employees with the word "training" in their job title. They did not find that workers shared managers' unitarist view of a common interest. Acquiescence was rather a grudging realism in a period of relative union weakness, with industrial relations still seen in conflictual terms. "Work was still experienced as time sold for money." (1995: p 212) The authors are pessimistic

about the long-term prospects for TQM, despite its apparent early successes, as more companies adopt it, because "they cannot all become market leaders".

Marchington (1992) sees tacit skills being used for three purposes (in ed. Sturdy et al. 1992: p 155):

1. "getting back" - against the employer, e.g. by working strictly to the book when this hinders production;
2. "getting by" - survival;
3. "getting on" - collaboration with the employer, e.g. if the internal labour market inclines workers to identify with the employer, or if they are influenced by a concept of self-worth.

He examines the introduction of employee involvement (EI) schemes and concludes that attempts to appropriate knowledge, such as quality circles, have had "minimal" effect in the United Kingdom, and criticises the assumption of "most publications" that EI schemes succeed in bringing about changes of attitude. He feels that "grand objectives" are not always achieved, and cites examples of late or inadequate briefings, and lack of management knowledge.

In work carried out for the Department of Employment, Marchington and his colleagues (Marchington et al. 1992) enumerate four principal categories of employee involvement. These categories, and the forms of communication or involvement which Marchington and his colleagues place in each, are as follows:

Downward communication

Newspaper

Employee report

Briefing system

Upward problem solving

Suggestion scheme

Attitude survey

Quality circles

Customer care/TQM

Financial employee involvement

Profit share scheme

Unit-wide bonus

Representative participation

JCC/works councils

Collective bargaining

Change programme

While their work is primarily quantitative, I have found it useful to draw upon these categories in investigating the level and type of employee involvement in the workplaces which formed the case studies discussed in succeeding chapters. I shall return to this when outlining the methodology for the present work.

"Communication" needs to take account of the differences of power evident in much of the literature, often understood as differences between managers and workers. PD Anthony's study, *The Ideology of Work*, written in 1977, remains useful for its appreciation of this. While not directly about communication techniques, it deals with several important issues for the student of corporate communication. Anthony states his main theme in his introduction:

> Ideologies of work ... are primarily directed at subordinates; their function is to explain the relative position of the subordinate and to influence his beliefs and his behaviour concerning the activities he is required to perform. An ideology of work is a defence of subordination and it entails an ideology of management upon which it is dependent. (1977: p 3)

He points out that many ideological views have been presented as axiomatic (1977: p 2), that ideologies are more successful when their "appeal is covert and their intentions are disguised" (1977: p 3), and the "most successful ideology is one which is not recognisable as such" (1977: p 4). He adds:

> A great deal of the ideology of work is directed at getting men to take work seriously when they know that it is a joke. (1977: p 5)

Anthony's view of the rejection of the importance of work by working-class culture finds an echo in some of Paul Willis's work (e.g. Willis: 1977), as does Anthony's citing of Ure on education inculcating docility (Anthony 1977: p 64) and Durkheim on liberal education making work unbearable for an educated working class. (1977: pp 154 ff.) Anthony seeks to outline how the dominant class has attempted, over many centuries, to convey the ideology of work to the working class. He says (1977: p 73): "Self-interest, when communicated to others, invariably takes ideological form."

A constant theme in Anthony's book is the difficulty, and absurdity, of trying to convey an ideology of work to the working class, often engaged in unpleasant, meaningless and downright dangerous jobs.

Anthony does not deal directly with the role of communications in the transmission of ideology, but he notes the tendency of human relations theorists to regard conflict as a result of poor communication, best solved by colonising informal groups through their infiltration by lower levels of management, such as foremen. However, he believes that much effort in convincing employees of the worrk ideology is aimed at managers in a period of growing uncertainty as hierarchies are flattened and traditional career paths are blocked, and suggests that the middle class may be rejecting the work ethic,

Thus, while not dealing explicitly with corporate communication, Anthony does raise the role of management in communication the ideology of working, and raises important questions about the homogeneity of management and the consequent delivery, or non-delivery, of a unified corporate message.

Willmott (1993) gives a useful critique of the "corporate culture" school of management thought. While corporate culture has, he believes, been "enthusiastically endorsed by exponents of other popular flavours of the decade" (1993: p 515), Willmott argues that corporate culture is "more than a passing fad" (1993: p 516), and that it is qualitatively different from other attempts to control the labour process, in that:

> The guiding aim of and abiding concern of corporate culturism, as I shall characterize it, is to win the 'hearts and minds' of employees: to define their purposes by managing what they think and feel, and not just how they behave. (1993: p 516)

While acknowledging that "practical applications of corporate culturism may be patchy, partial and half-baked", Willmott argues against it on moral grounds in a piece drawing striking parallels between corporate culturism and Orwellian "doublethink":

> Rather, attention is focused upon the moral significance of corporate culturism. Its central argument is that, in the name of expanded practical autonomy, it aspires to extend management control by colonizing the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently totalitarian. (1993: p 517)

Willmott's moral critique draws upon the work of MacIntyre (1985), who criticises managerialism for its claim to moral neutrality while seeking to control the actions of employees:

> It is the gap between the generalized notion of effectiveness and the actual behavior that is open to managers which suggests that the social uses of the notion (of managerial effectiveness) are other than they

> purport to be. That the notion is used to sustain and extend the authority and power of managers is not of course in question; but its use in connection with those tasks derives from the belief that managerial authority and power are justified because managers possess an ability to put skills and knowledge to work in the service of achieving certain ends. But what if effectiveness is part of a masquerade of social control rather than a reality? (1985: p 75)

With regard to MacIntyre's general thesis in this work, it would be difficult to improve on the succinct account given by Richardson (1988):

> He argued that the rise of management reflects the weakening of moral consensus in modern societies. We turn to technique and efficiency when we are no longer held together by shared beliefs about the good life. Management offers us the prospect of success without the messy business of considering our goals and ideas.

Richardson suggests that the Labour Party in its "New Labour" manifestation is an example of this before moving on to his main argument - he is a theologically conservative bishop - that the Church of England is moving to a similarly managerial stance. Willmott draws upon MacIntyre's profoundly ethical stance in making out his case against corporate culture.

Like Huczynski, Willmott sees a quasi-religious element in corporate culturism, speaking of employees who refuse to accept it being "excommunicated" from the organisation, as the corporate culture "excludes, silences or punishes those who question its creed" (1993: p 519). He sees corporate culture being *systematically* strengthened "in a way that *excludes* (through attention to recruitment) and *eliminates* (through training) *all other values*." (1993: p 524) He again draws attention to party discipline in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when saying that:

> In corporate culturism, respect for the individual is equated with complying with the values of the corporate culture. To challenge the values enshrined in this 'respect' is a crime against the culture. (1993: p 526)

In this, Willmott discerns "thought control through uniform definition of meaning" (1993: p 527), circumscribing "the meaning and imagined possibility

of freedom". He criticises corporate culturism for ignoring the "underlying contradiction between the market status of labour as a disposable commodity and its corporate culture status as a valued human resource" (1993: p 531) He acknowledges that corporate culture can have a "seduction of security" for employees (1993: p 535). but suggests that corporate culture schemes can be self-defeating in that there may be "a further degradation and distortion of communication as employees instrumentally adapt their behaviour to conform with the relevant corporate code" in a game of "cool alternation" (1993: p 536 ff.). He suggests, however, that the cynicism engendered by this role-playing may act as a safety valve dissipating more robust forms of opposition.

Communication may be regarded as a key element in the engendering of the corporate culture which Willmott so trenchantly criticises, and it is to literature dealing specifically with corporate communication that I shall now turn.

2.3 Corporate communication literature

Connell, in a paper (1994) primarily dealing with the use of corporate video, gives a useful and succinct definition of employee communications as:

> any purposeful, managerially supervised attempt to address employees about matters associated with the organisation in which they are employed. (1994: p 1)

Connell continues:

> Since the early 1980s, UK managers have felt it necessary, and have been encouraged in several ways ... to *involve* and *commit* their employees to their companies' missions.... Perhaps because it can be made to seem a direct managerial response to a prolonged period of industrial unrest in the UK, it has been proposed that employee communication is one of a number of powerful means by which employers have regained and sought to maintain their direct control of production and labour processes. If production processes, monitored by information technologies, order employees' actions, employee communications order their minds. (1994: p 1)

He notes a more optimistic interpretation, that greater flexibility may give rise to "upskilling and greater autonomy, but that those holding a pessimistic view would construe this as "evidence of the intensification of the work process".

Connell's own view is that:

> employee communication (should) be understood as a product of uncertainty and ambiguity rather than the outcome of some overarching strategy. (1994: p 2)

He sees "contradiction ... at the heart of employee communication initiatives". (1994: p 2) After reviewing the work of Huczynski, Handy and others, he attributes "growing attention to employee communication" more to "attempts to grapple with the fundamental instability and uncertainty of the business and commercial world than to any grand plan about how to control employees". (1994: p 5)

Connell's view is, I believe, basically correct. Contradictions are certainly present; however, while communicators may not have an "overarching" strategy, the amount of effort invested by companies in their work does imply that they perceive themselves as having a strategy of some kind. Perhaps the uncertainty and ambiguity can be located in the labour process itself.

Connell sees two principal phases in the development of employee communications in the United Kingdom. The first arose from "a period of intense strife and rapidly growing unemployment in many sectors of British industry". (1994: p 5) Encouraged by Tory anti-union laws, many employers sought ways of communicating with employees without going through trade union representatives. The CBI urged employee communication to "engage the support, understanding and optimum contribution of all employees". (cited at Connell 1994: p 6) The second, still ongoing, phase is seen by Connell as

"related to the extensive reorganisation of corporate enterprises and of labour processes. " (1994: p 6)

Connell acknowledges that the enthusiasm for change which he cites in this work may not be reciprocated by those subject to downsizing or work intensification. He writes:

> More recently, then, attention to employee communication has been stimulated in part by practical concerns about organising, controlling and even re-assuring a fragmenting and volatile labour force... As businesses undertake major cultural change, involving perhaps significant downsizing and organisational re-engineering, they have in equal proportion felt the need of robust internal communications. (1994: p 7)

Trade union activists might construe this less optimistically as a need to persuade workers into acquiescence while their colleagues are sacked.

Connell goes on to examine various forms of communication, pointing out that they are often advised as counterweights to the "grapevine". (He does not address the possibility of the "grapevine" being correct, for example in predicting a number of redundancies within ten of the figure eventually announced.) Before examining his main example of corporate video, the selection of which he justifies on the basis of its wide dissemination, Connell briefly looks at some other new channels of communication, including electronic methods. He advises caution about accepting too readily management claims of widespread use of new technologies. He is wise to do so, for he cites BT as having taken a decision to "move almost completely away from print-based media". (1994: p 8) Two years later, on a preliminary visit to a CWU official to gather material, I was handed copies of eight different BT employee publications. While Connell concentrates on the video, even this relatively common means of communication is used far less than the company newsletter, which remains the most common

form of employee communication, used in 92% of companies surveyed. (1994: p 21)

Connell draws on the work by Sackmann (1991) and Graham (1994), to define the use of video for "employee communication, rather than for skills or health and safety training" as hegemonic. (1994: p 9) He explains this term (1994: p 10):

> By *hegemonic* communication, I mean that order of communication which has as its manifest purpose the involvement and commitment of employees to the organisation. It is communication activity which seeks to define for employees the nature of the global organisational reality and their positions within it. Such communication is decidedly *axiomatic*.

He adds a caveat against drawing the distinction between hegemonic and operational communication too strictly.

Connell goes on to outline the growth of communications specialists as a distinct occupational grouping, and their claims to "professional" status. He cites a communications manager as believing that "those responsible for excellent communications still have a mission and a job to do to convince their colleagues". (1994: p 13) To an unsympathetic reader, such as a trade union official, this claim to "professionalism" may look like managerial "empire building". Returning to the theme of "professionalism", Connell contrasts what he believes to be a rather old-fashioned view of employee communication as a means of union exclusion with a situation in which:

> Professional communicators view internal communication in a manner not dissimilar to the public service broadcaster's view of journalism. If employee communication is to serve company interests, it does so best by being neutral, impartial, and employee oriented. (1994: p 15)

Connell does not elaborate on how this "neutrality" can be achieved in a situation where communication professionals "would not dissent from the view that a

prime directive of all employee-oriented communication is the dissemination of approved, corporate messages". (1994: p 16) Later in the paper, Connell examines specific techniques of modern corporate video, including apparently more robust questioning of chief executives in interviews, but it is difficult to see how a genuinely aggressive questioning of policy or controversial actions can take place in a company-sponsored medium. Nor does he address the questions which have been raised about the extent to which public broadcasters are neutral or impartial in dealing with relations between capital and labour. In the 1984-5 miners' strike, the question of bias in both the print and broadcasting media was a major issue. Douglass's robustly titled *Tell us Lies about the Miners* (2nd edition, 1987) and articles by Schwartz and Fountain (ed. Beynon 1985) question the impartiality of the news media, while Jones (1986) defends coverage from the point of view of a BBC journalist.

Connell goes on to cite a survey on chief executives' views which "pointed to the emergence of the so-called 'open company'", with a "greater focus on employees", which included "encouraging employees ... 'to put forward new ideas and to experiment with without fear of recrimination if things do not work'". (1994: p 19) Connell warns, however, that "it would be naive to assume ... that the apparent freedom to take risks and to pursue individual initiatives amounts to untrammelled employee autonomy." (1994: p 19)

Baskin and Aronoff's study of interpersonal communication (1980) begins by exploring some basic concepts of communication, such as the need for an overlap of experience being necessary to understanding, and the idea that "boundaries" (restrictions on acceptable behaviour) are "created largely through communication". (1980: p 12) They criticize the Taylorist tradition for its lack of consideration of different motivations of different individuals, citing Terkel's example (1975) of Mike Lefevre, who says "I deliberately fuck it up to see if it'll

get by" and who objects to being told to call a manager "Sir", with the more harmonious work relations in the Eaton Corporation plant in Kearney, Nebraska, with single-status employment, a basis of trust, and consequent improvements in attendance and productivity. Again citing Terkel, Baskin and Aronoff do recognize to some extent that workers do not have the same "needs, perceptions and values" as the company for which they work. This recognition is far more explicit than in the other texts, reviewed below, aimed at improving managers' capabilities in communication.

The authors continue by looking at manager-subordinate communication - terminology which might raise some eyebrows among authors of works written a few years later! - claiming that co-orientation requires "agreement, accuracy and understanding", and that it "depends on a mutual understanding of the degree of agreement and accuracy that exists in the communication relationship". (1980: p 33) They cite a finding by Russell of 20% "false consensus" in which supervisors and subordinates disagree but do not recognize it. Baskin and Aronoff return in the following chapter to the effect of shared or unshared experience on the understanding, or lack thereof, of a message.

Baskin and Aronoff detect two basic approaches to interpersonal relationships - director/controller and understander/facilitator (1980: p 38). They apply the name "phatic communication" to casual "passing the time of day" conversation, which they see understanding/facilitating managers using to listen rather than talk, while director/controllers may use it as a form of distancing. They do not address the question of whether phatic communication can serve a disciplinary purpose. For example, the "phatic" enquiry, "Bus late again this morning, Pete?" could be a casual enquiry about the punctuality of the bus service, or a friendly warning to Pete about his timekeeping.

Baskin and Aronoff note (1980: p 75) the efficiency of the grapevine in spreading non-controversial information and also "information about how to interpret messages transmitted in the formal system." They also note that messages can be sent, perhaps at odds with the company's official line, by such matters as budgets and office allocation. They cite an example of an American company which declared itself to be "decentralising", while at the same time requiring all expenditure over $10,000 to be cleared with head office. They also note the prevention of communication by persons declared redundant and asked not to come to work, instead being sent on "gardening leave" for their period of notice.

Looking at communication and organizational change, Baskin and Aronoff define the problem as "achieving orientation towards specific changes, ... the development of common understandings about change". (1980: p 140) They acknowledge that in an organization "resistance to change usually serves to maintain its smooth and healthy operation". (1980: p 137) Resistance, at individual, group or organizational level, is most likely "when change is perceived as a threat to basic securities, when change is not understood, and *when change is imposed.*" (1980: p 141) It is easier if "more people are involved in all phases of the decision-making process". (1980: p 142)

Sackmann's work (1991) on cultural knowledge has already been cited in relation to Connell (above). She notes (1991: p 29) the "frequently held" assumption that "culture is leader generated and leader centered". "This bias", she claims, "results from researchers' predominant focus on top management." She adds:

> In addition authors in the managerial literature have a bias toward top management, often for practical reasons. Top management is most likely to give successful access and entry to a company, and its members constitute the desired audience of popular management books. Furthermore many researchers and practitioners believe that interventions and changes have to originate and be driven by the top. A focus on top

> management is, therefore, desirable because it is practical: access and remaining in a company for research purposes is made easier and the level and focus of analysis are well defined. Hence the resulting research efforts are less messy and complex. In addition, it is management's desire to control the company, including employees' behaviors. (1991: p 29)

Sackmann considers this narrow focus on top managers "premature". However, her own access to the company which she calls "BIND" relied heavily upon the favourable response of the most senior levels of management.

Reliance upon the good offices of management for access may perhaps have serious effects on research. Blyler and Thralls, in their introductory chapter of a volume of essays which is otherwise of little relevance to corporate communication (ed. Blyler & Thralls, 1993) introduce three approaches to communication - social constructionist, ideologic and paralogic hermeneutics. They observe (1993: p 32):

> (T)he ideologic approach cannot be incorporated into existing ways researchers and teachers in professional communication define and conduct their work - if the ideologic approach is understood to mean critiquing and maybe even resisting the larger economic values of a commodity culture. Such critiques could significantly refocus research and pedagogy in ways that threaten the idea of a cooperative relationship existing between academe and industry and between research and professional practice. For example, by refocusing research on communication as a vehicle for serving and protecting the economic interests of dominant groups, the ideologic approach creates a potentially adversarial relationship between researchers and the very organizations and agencies that are the object of study or the sources of funding for researchers' work..... Rather than helping students make the transition to the communication demands of their jobs, the ideologic approach would help students understand the ways in which workplace communication practices may protect private interests and subvert the larger public good.

Their assumptions that all students of communication will wish to enter managerial jobs, and that funding may properly influence a research agenda, will not necessarily commend themselves to all readers.

Bernstein (1984) is concerned with company image. While he claims in his last chapter that "of all nine audiences the staff is the most important" (1984: p 241), the book as a whole does not reflect this, nor does what Bernstein perceives as the low status of most corporate communication executives. (1984: p 242) Among other things, Bernstein notes that image changes imposed from outside often fail, pointing out that an image change alone might be the equivalent of putting "Monte Carlo" on the destination board of a number 73 London Transport bus, which is still going to Stoke Newington. He refers to Watney's image change, but does not allude to the activity by the Campaign for Real Ale which led to the change. A vigorous campaign, ridiculing "Grotny's Dead Barrel", led in turn to an attempt to relaunch the keg beer as simply "Red", to its eventual removal from the British market and the repainting of Watney's houses any colour but red, and finally to the demise of the Watney's brand name. This may perhaps have an analogy with union counter-communication.

Bernstein cites a CBI expert on employee communication who prefers "involvement" to communication" because:

> It's not just a note, something on the notice board... it's involvement in the company's activities. (1984: Ch 16)

Bernstein believes that "companies who are good at internal communication are good at external communication" because it effectively makes employees company ambassadors and "investment in skills and resources pays off". (1984: Ch 16)

Clampitt (1991) has produced a "how to" book aimed at managers needing to communicate with subordinates. In broad terms, the book shows some of the features which Huczynski notes as features of management literature in general, such as lists - for example, five myths about information (Ch, 4) and a further

five about communication (Ch. 5). Like other authors on communication, Clampitt states the obvious, sometimes in convoluted terms, as when he advises managers to "realign information priorities" (decide what's important) and in his description of the main disadvantage of the "communication channel", face-to-face conversation:

> Geographical proximity and time synchronicity are the greatest limitations of this channel. (1991: p 116)

In his opening chapter, Clampitt contrasts two managerial styles, both of which he believes to have disadvantages: the "arrow manager", whose communication style is top-down, one-way and prescriptive; and the "circuit manager", whose emphasis on consultation may "stress feedback over response, relationship over content ... and understanding over compliance". In Clampitt's view, this style may over-emphasize job satisfaction, since "the evidence shows that a satisfied worker can be a very lazy one". This is one of a very few glimpses in communication literature of an underlying conflict of interest between workers and employers, which is otherwise glossed over or even denied. Clampitt goes on to a third management style, which he calls "communication as dance". He draws a number of comparisons with dance, such as that both involve "coorientation" (sensing cues, anticipation of action, etc.); both have "a repertoire of skills that may pass from the level of consciousness", and so on.

In his second chapter, Clampitt asks "What is communication anyway?" (1991: Ch. 2 title) Among other features he notes that "context construction is uniquely sensitive to time sequencing". Timing and sequencing, he believes, are important, but it remains a mystery why people see some things, but not others, as connected. Clampitt points out that "meanings can be constructed without any message at all", for example in the manner in which employees who are not given information may decide that no news is bad news. He observes the

existence of "secondary" messages, such as the use of christian name or surname within an organization, and other symbols of formality or informality.

Clampitt defines culture (1991: Ch. 3) as the selection of a few ideas to live by, and "an efficient mechanism to coordinate the activities of employees". He defines two basic methods of control: inductive and deductive. Inductive control involves detailed instructions, most aimed at those workers "who have the least intellectual capacity to process the overload of information". Deductive control relies more on specifying general approaches and "ways of doing things". Clampitt believes that corporate culture is "a necessity because of the limits of managerial power". He remarks, "there are only so many times a manager can threaten to fire someone." (1991: p 54)

In communicating the values of the corporate culture, Clampitt, like Graham (1994), observes the importance of the "socialisation process" used to inculcate the culture into new starters, stressing the importance of the first month of employment. He notes the link of values to specific forms of behaviour, such as answering the telephone in no more than two rings. He observes that there may be conflicts between values, such as a commitment to customer service and spending too long talking to one customer, which must be reconciled by "the effective manager". He cites, in all seriousness, a corporate president who resolved to change corporate culture, and adopted the Pythonesque method of sounding a buzzer during board meetings if any director said anything reminiscent of the old culture. (This may, of course, reflect Clampitt's living in an American business environment, where this behaviour may not appear quite so bizarre as it does to the British reader.)

Clampitt's fourth chapter is given over to the subject of information. Much of the material is in the "obvious when you think about it" category, such as the

statement that there is a greater likelihood of distortion with more links in the information chain, and that the origin of a message may be as important as its substance. Clampitt observes a number of tensions (1991: pp 84 ff.) in communicating information, among them whether information should be open to all or given on a "need to know" basis. He observes that technical employees may be in a better position than their managers to know what information is needed to do the job. (This must also apply to many manual workers.) Looking at formal and informal communication, Clampitt cites figures showing the grapevine as the second most frequent source of information, and employee dissatisfaction with this situation. Trade unions are not mentioned (1991: Table 4.3) as a source of information; this may well reflect low union density in the United States. Clampitt notes that dissatisfaction with "downward" information grows the further the source is from the recipients. He also observes a tendency for subordinates to send only "good" news upwards, and for employees to be dissatisfied with management responses to queries. This contrasts with Sackmann's emphasis (1991) on the need for research to concentrate on top management.

Clampitt goes on (1991: Ch. 5) to examine "communication channels", such as face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, memos, formal presentations, and so on. In looking at employee publications, he is scathing about their "tendency to take on the characteristics of a high-school year-book" (1991: p 123). He compares these channels in various aspects, listing twelve "dimensions" such as feedback potential, time and space constraints, and so on. He suggests that in selecting a channel or channels for a given communication (1991: p 137):

> The objective should be to align four elements:
> - the needs of the sender
> - the attributes of the message
> - the attributes of the channel
> - the needs of the receiver

The sixth chapter deals with "performance feedback". (1991: Ch. 6 title) Clampitt unquestioningly accepts the capitalist work ethic. The training process increases workers' identification with management ideas of performance. "A manager cannot not give performance feedback", in that workers will construe the absence of criticism as meaning that their performance is adequate. A common interest between managers and workers, and the desire of workers to improve, is taken for granted. Clampitt does not, overtly at least, consider the very different attitude of O'Brien towards work (in Thompson 1963: p 904):

> It is the workman's interest to do as little work, and to get as much for it as is possible. It is the middleman's interest to get as much work as he can out of the man, and to give as little for it. Here then are their respective interests as directly opposed to each other as two fighting bulls.

Nevertheless, this assumption of common interest does implicitly clash with the need for appraisals and "keeping workers on their toes". Indeed, Clampitt does refer (1991: p 170) to the way in which "poor performers actively try to short-circuit criticism by seeking out positive comments". They may "build the excuses into their inquiries or ask leading questions about their performance". These seem to be interesting forms of resistance by white-collar workers in a non-union situation, or one where a union is not strong enough to resist the imposition of an appraisal system.

Clampitt's seventh chapter, and the last I shall review here, deals with the communication of change, which Clampitt calls "an inevitable and sometimes brutal fact of corporate life". (1991: p 174) He likens the reaction of employees towards non-routine change to attitudes towards impending death. Like death, change is presented as inevitable, with no real negotiation. "Deal making" with employees is deprecated, and workers are expected to "honestly and wholeheartedly endorse the change". "Giving in to employee demands" is listed

as an "inappropriate response" (1991: p 190), while "appropriate actions" include "Be flexible, with regard to inconsequential items" and "Be firm, with regard to the basic position". The background to this robust advice to managers may well lie in the American situation, for in Clampitt's worked example of a case of new technology, the only indication that the workplace is unionised is in a reference to "union hassles" if the workers were sacked. There is no reference to the involvement of union officials in seeking to negotiate the change.

2.4 The puzzle of communication

A major contradiction is manifest in the literature reviewed in previous subsections. What is perhaps remarkable about these bodies of literature is the lack of mutual reference between them. In particular, the two bodies of management literature - the general literature and that dealing specifically with communication - take no account of the context or the increasing competitive pressures facing companies. More specifically, conflict, when it is mentioned at all, is seen as a "problem" to be solved by management, perhaps by more effective communication; the possible legitimacy of an opposing view is not considered by these bodies of literature. The only apparent exceptions are Connell's paper, written from the perspective of a social scientist rather than a business school academic, and Baskin and Aronoff's brief citation of Terkel.

In the context of this research, the labour process literature has been helpful in deepening my understanding of management's need to subordinate workers and of the conflicts inherent in such an attempt. The general management literature has helped focus my attention upon the changes taking place in workplaces and the general forms of employee involvement which have been introduced, and how they have been related to new and more professionalised methods of communication.

Hints of conflict do arise in this literature. In part, this takes the form of oblique references to the importance of ensuring that dissatisfaction with performance is accurately conveyed to employees, in case failure to give proper warning becomes an issue if an employee is dismissed, or to the need to avoid inadvertently arousing fears of redundancy through errors in communication. Clampitt's emphasis on managerial prerogatives also indicates a potential underlying conflict. More generally, the question arises of why, if there is no conflict, there is a perceived need to communicate. Connell's suggestion (1994) that communication is hegemonic and Anthony's view (1977) that ideology, when transmitted to subordinates, is part of the process of subordination are perhaps useful.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the literature dealing specifically with communication generally shows little interest in the linguistic content of corporate communication . "How to" books rely very much on anecdotal evidence of communication efforts which succeeded or failed, but success or failure is attributed to factors such as appropriate or inappropriate timing of the message, rather than to its linguistic formulation.

How then are these bodies of literature, with their common area of general concern so rarely recognised, to be reconciled? Can we understand how the conflictual relations evident in many workplaces are manifested in the, often outwardly bland and consensual, communication which companies address to their employees? I would suggest that answers may lie in the presence of a body of literature in the field of linguistics which could sit well with these developments in the analysis of corporate communication, but which does not appear to be referenced by writers in the area of corporate communication and management. A number of scholars in the field of critical linguistics have

engaged in close analysis of discourse in the general press and the language of politics. The work of Fairclough (1989), Hodge and Kress (1993) and, especially, Fowler (1991, 1979) is especially important. I suggest that this work may usefully be applied in developing a critical analysis of the discourse of corporate communication with employees.

Fowler usefully defines the purpose of critical linguistics (1991: p 67):

> Critical linguistics seeks, by studying the minute details of linguistic structure in the light of the social and historical situation of the text, to display to consciousness the patterns of belief and value which are encoded in the language - and which are below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the discourse as 'natural'.

In doing this, Fowler draws upon the earlier work of Halliday, but seeks to simplify and make more accessible Halliday's "rather forbidding terminology", and criticises his work for what he calls his "'free enterprise' model of communication" (1991: p 70), as if the use of language were simply a matter of free choice by the individual, without any societal influence.

Fairclough (1989: p 198) proposes concepts of **strategic** and **communicative discourse**. Strategic discourse is that aimed at achieving results, while communicative discourse is oriented to achieving understanding. Corporate communication could be expected to fall within the category of strategic discourse, with the purpose of achieving greater employee commitment to the company. Fairclough's concept of strategic discourse is very similar to Connell's concept of "hegemonic communication". (1994)

Fowler suggests that the examination of some constructions is particularly useful in examining the use of language in the press. I believe that they may equally usefully be applied to corporate communications.

In discussing transitivity, he observes that:

> Since transitivity makes options available, we are always suppressing some possibilities, so the choice we make - better, the choice made by the discourse - indicates our point of view, is ideologically significant. (1991: p 71)

Within the area of corporate communication, possible uses of transitivity to suppress possibilities would include the omission of the agent in controversial matters such as redundancies, or the attribution of the dismissals to a force such as "the market", rather than human participants such as the board of directors. Similarly, the commonly used expression "lose your job", placing the patient as syntactic subject, is ideologically significant. ("300 workers at ABC Ltd lost their jobs." rather than "ABC Ltd sacked 300 workers.")

Fowler continues, in his discussion of vocabulary:

> Vocabulary can be regarded .... as a representation of the world *for* a culture; the world as perceived according to the ideological needs of a culture.... It is an elementary, but fundamental, task for the critical analyst to note, in the discourse s/he is studying, just what terms habitually occur, what segments of the society's world enjoy constant discursive attention. Clusters of related terms are found to mark out distinct kinds of preoccupation and topic. (1991: p 82)

Such "clusters" may for example be technical terms (e.g. 'appendectomy'; 'anaesthetic'; 'cardiovascular' in medicine), or ideological expressions (e.g. 'imperialism'; 'reformism' in Marxist politics, or 'lout'; 'thug'; 'yob' describing antisocially inclined young people in right-wing tabloids). Included in such clusters are words with a general meaning, "coloured by their contexts" (1991: p 84), such as "struggle" in the lexicon of Marxism. In the examples of corporate communication to be studied, I had expected to find evidence of a "business" lexicon.

Fairclough (1989) draws attention to the tendency **to play down the expression of power relationships.** He cautions against a facile acceptance that there is a "conspiracy" around this, since it appears to be a feature of many European languages. Fairclough specifically mentions the change of usage in those languages which have a "familiar" and "polite" form of 'you', such as French, from a basis in social rank to one of closeness of relationship. (e.g. In French, the former usage would be for a child to address her, socially "superior", father as 'vous', and for an officer to address a private soldier as 'tu'. This usage has now been reversed.) Despite this caveat, Fairclough does see a disguising of power relations in such features as the use of christian names in the workplace. I have myself attended disciplinary hearings in which the person being sacked was addressed by his first name throughout. In some cases, companies have adopted terminology which seeks to avoid the language of subordination entirely, such as Asda's labelling of its staff entrances as "Colleagues' Entrance".

Fairclough examines the way in which "ideologies are embedded in features of discourse which are taken for granted as matters of common sense" (1989: p 77), claiming that "Ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible." (1989: p 85) He introduces a concept of "naturalisation", in which a dominant discourse type embodies what appears to be "normal" or "neutral". Thus, we might expect the language of corporate communications to take for granted concepts such as profit and competition which might be rejected by alternative ideologies. Fairclough's remarks mirror Anthony's previously cited comments that ideologies are most successful when their "appeal is covert and their intentions are disguised" and that the "most successful ideology is one which is not recognisable as such". (1977: pp 3-4)

In the next chapter I shall draw upon this body of literature in the field of critical linguistics to develop an analysis of the discourse of corporate communication,

and now turn briefly to a consideration of another - and perhaps the most important - element in corporate communication, its reception by its audience.

As a matter of convenience I use the term **"the reader"** to refer to the recipient of corporate communication, although she or he may in fact be a participant in a team briefing, a listener to an audiotape or viewer of company video productions. Every reader brings to the communication process an interpretative ability based on experience, together with intertextual interpretation based on earlier reading. (This forms part of what Fairclough (1989) calls "members' resources".) In the public press, the success of a newspaper or magazine relies upon the congruence of its style and content with the opinions and interests of its readers. Thus, the *Daily Mail*, for example, assumes that its readers are socially and politically conservative members of the lower middle class. This relationship is not simplistic, and a newspaper may need to vary its normal political stance if it conflicts with the experience of its readers. For example, the *Daily Mail* normally assumes that its readership will wish it to support the police, but this line would have to be varied if police officers were to beat up a respectable middle-class person resembling its assumed readers.

Corporate communications similarly make assumptions about the reader. This may include assumptions about technical knowledge, attitude to the company and to the concept of the "career", and so on. The success or failure of communication may rely on the "fit" between the assumed reader and the actual reader. Therefore, a major element in the research was to be the question of the extent to which intended readers were able to decode management communication, and **to understand the process by which they did so.** I, as researcher, perhaps had privileged knowledge, acquired through the study and application of critical linguistics. Assuming, for example, that a group of recipients rejected the message of a piece of communication, would they simply

dismiss it as "bullshit", justify their negative interpretation purely in terms of "common sense" or past experience, or would they be able to account for their interpretation, completely or partially, in terms of the language used? The range of possibilities thus ran from a sophisticated understanding of language used (albeit perhaps without a knowledge of the technical lexicon of linguistics) to a total absence of any consideration of the language used. Where on this range would employees lie? Would any differences be found regarding, for example, their level of education or type of job? The development of a methodology for determining these matters forms a large part of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 The Research Process

3.1 Introduction

The research involved three case studies. In each case the purpose was:

1. to discover what forms of employee communication were used within the employing organization;
2. to apply linguistic analysis to specific items of written communication;
3. and to investigate employee attitudes toward their employer's communication, and their interpretation of employer texts.

3.2 The case studies

The choice of case studies depended upon contacts in the trade union movement. I decided that one study should be of my former employer, GPT. I had readily available contacts in the company, and it presented possibly interesting findings with regard to regionalism, since its Coventry and Liverpool factories had rather different union traditions and had indeed been part of separate companies until 1988. Additionally, the Liverpool site had been the subject of work by Thompson (1983), Thompson and Bannon (1984) and by Roberts and Corcoran-Nantes (1995), which had formed part of the literature review. In this company, focus group interviews were carried out in both Coventry and Liverpool.

GPT Ltd is the largest telecommunications manufacturing company in the United Kingdom, formed in 1988 by the merger of the telecommunications interests of GEC and Plessey.

The telecommunications industry has undergone massive structural change in recent years as a result of the move from electromechanical to electronic technology and of the liberalisation of the market and introduction of competition

in many major capitalist countries. In the case of the United Kingdom, the most important aspect of technological change has been the introduction of the System X electronic telephone exchange (called a "public switch" in the terminology of the industry). This switch was initially introduced when telephone services were provided by the Post Office (British PTT), as a collaborative effort involving the Post Office, in collaboration with GEC, Plessey and STC. (STC later withdrew from work on System X.) The installation of this equipment from approximately 1980 onward was completed by the early 1990s. The new technology was characterised by the need for less labour - especially manual labour - in its manufacture, installation, operation and management. This has reduced employment levels both in manufacturing companies and in telephony service providers. This loss of employment was exacerbated by the eventual completion of the System X network throughout the United Kingdom, significantly reducing the number of workers required for installation and commissioning of exchanges.

Commercial factors contributing to change included the privatisation of the Post Office's telephony operations as British Telecom (later BT) in 1984, with the introduction of competition into the United Kingdom. Some orders were in fact won by other companies, but System X continued to be the market leader by a very wide margin. A less favourable commercial feature was the decline in the British companies' share of the world market during the post-war period from 25% to around 3%. This could in part be attributed to the failure of British companies to develop commercially an early technological lead in electronic technology. It could also be attributed to the commercial caution of GEC, which was extremely reluctant to give "loss leaders" in order to break into a market, instead insisting upon showing a profit on each contract. This was believed to have lost the Indian market to a competitor.

A third major factor was the extremely high cost of research and development. It was estimated in 1988 that the next generation of public switch would require a secure base of 12% of the world market in telephony to justify its development costs. This would be possible on the basis of the home market for an American company, and perhaps for a Japanese one, but no European country had a home market of this size. Britain constitutes about six per cent, and from the time of GPT's foundation, initially as a friendly merger of the telecommunications interests of GEC and Plessey in a joint venture, the company was looking for a European partner, with Italy initially being the most likely country. However, this was prevented by the failure of a proposed merger in Italy between Italtel and Telettra, and by 1991 the whole Plessey group was the subject of a hostile takeover by GEC in conjunction with Siemens, resulting in the ownership of GPT residing 60% with GEC and 40% with Siemens.

The merger, with the consequent elimination of duplicated facilities which had previously existed in both GEC and Plessey, exacerbated by the sectoral characteristic of a move from electromechanical to electronic equipment and a consequent move of emphasis from hardware to software, has led to substantial reductions in the number of employees, especially among manual workers and production-related white-collar staff. Especially in Coventry, this had had an effect upon union density, for it was workers in these areas who were most likely to be members of a trade union.

This tendency has become more marked since the hostile takeover of 1991, when the roles of chairman and managing director of the company, were split. Richard Reynolds, who had been both chairman and managing director, remained as chairman, while Peter Gershon was appointed as managing director. This was interpreted by many employees as "kicking Mr Reynolds upstairs". This interpretation has perhaps been given some credence by subsequent events, since

Mr Reynolds, once regarded as a likely successor to Lord Weinstock as managing director of the GEC group, has since resigned from GEC's main board and left the company. Mr Gershon followed a policy of hiving off non-core elements of the company's business, closing such peripheral functions as the company photographic laboratory, and maintenance departments such as the joinery shop and plumbers. (An unforeseen result of this policy was the inability of the company to turn on the heating the following winter, having dismissed the man who knew how to do so.) Even the department responsible for the manufacture of the cabinets in which exchange equipment was contained was disposed of, although it remained on the Coventry site under its new owners. (As this thesis was being completed, the company sold its Northern Irish plant at Ballynahinch to the same buyers.)

Reorganisation followed the formation of GPT, culminating in 1995, shortly after Mr Gershon's departure to another GEC subsidiary, with the merger of the company's two largest business divisions. Telecommunications Systems Group (TSG), whose managing director, Tony Cobbe, was promoted to succeed Mr Gershon, had been responsible for engineering and supplying switching equipment and software for public telephone exchanges. Network Systems Group (NSG) had been responsible for transmission equipment. These two groups were merged as Public Networks Group (PNG), bringing under a single management team the whole of the company's public telephony work. This led immediately to 200 redundancies, about half of them in Coventry.

The company now employs some twelve thousand people worldwide, while its GEC predecessor employed 15,000 in Coventry alone in 1980. Between the formation of GPT in 1988 and 1993, the number of people employed in Coventry fell from 8,000 in six plants to 3,000 in the two surviving factories, remaining stable at that level until 1997. These reductions in the workforce have fallen

disproportionately upon manual workers and production-related white-collar employees. This has caused some difficulty in relations between manual and white-collar trade unions.

Coventry remains the largest "region" in the company, and is the site of its headquarters. The next largest sites are Liverpool and Beeston (Nottingham), both of which are former Plessey sites. Other, smaller, sites in the United Kingdom include Dagenham, Poole, Chorley, Borehamwood and (until 1997) Ballynahinch. Historically, the unions in the former Plessey sites, and especially Liverpool (Thompson & Bannon 1984), have been much more militant than those in the GEC sites. For this reason, and because one of the two articles examined below referred specifically to events in Liverpool, focus group meetings were held both in Coventry and Liverpool.

BT was GPT's principal British customer, employing a workforce with a similar skill mix but with much higher levels of trade union membership, and affected by the same changes in the telecommunications market which had been evident in the case of GPT. It was also regarded by GPT employees as a "better" employer than the latter company, especially in its salary levels and what was believed to be its more equitable treatment of potentially redundant employees, most notably in its reluctance to make employees compulsorily redundant and its avoidance of the need to do so by severance payments for volunteers which were very generous in comparison with those prevailing in GPT. These differences offered the possibility of contrasts with GPT: would the BT employees appreciate their relative good fortune and perceive the company as a "good" employer, or would the much higher union density indicate a more robust oppositional stance than that in GPT?

BT is Britain's main telecommunications service provider, enjoying about 90% of the market. It was originally a section of the former British PTT, becoming a separate structure in 1981, and was privatised in 1984. It is the largest private-sector employer in the United Kingdom, but is seeking to reduce employee numbers following the completion of the System X digital network. The company has already substantially reduced its workforce, albeit by voluntary redundancy encouraged by relatively generous severance payments. It was formerly known as British Telecom, but adopted the abbreviation as its official name, perhaps because of an intention to diversify outside its traditional field of telephony. However, telephony remains its main business and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

The Royal Mail was one of a small number of companies offering the opportunity to study communication in the context of an industrial dispute during the course of the research. It offered particularly interesting possibilities since it was apparent that communication with employees, including attempts at media management by the company, was playing an important role in the conduct of the dispute. The fact that the strikes took place appeared to indicate the failure of items of communication intended to avert the dispute. Alternatively it might emerge in the course of the study that the company's communication had at least played an ameliorating role, perhaps by weakening the resolve of some employees to support the strikes or by bringing about a more rapid resolution of the dispute than might otherwise have been the case.

Royal Mail was also part of the former British PTT. Its former telecommunications activities were privatised as an independent company, British Telecom (now BT), in the mid-1980s. Its parcels division, Parcelforce, has been opened to competition, and is also a separate company. The possibility of privatisation of mail services has been mooted by recent Conservative

governments, but the company retains a monopoly on the delivery of letters and small packets and remains within the public sector.

During 1996, an industrial dispute began between the company and the Communication Workers Union (CWU). At issue were the union's attempt to gain an increase in wages and the company's desire to introduce new working practices, including teamworking. The company gave this initiative the title "Employee Agenda", which was itself the subject of some controversy. In a communication with branches outlining the union's position, the then joint General Secretary of the CWU, Alan Johnson, wrote:

> Royal Mail have been the extremists. Having created a climate of distrust and with morale plummeting, they have continued to pursue proposals patently unacceptable to the staff under a heading (Employee Agenda) which insultingly purports to represent staff concerns.

These trenchant remarks, in a section otherwise devoted to rebutting allegations of extremism against the union executive, are in marked contrast to the general spirit of the union's communication about the dispute, which tends to place emphasis on technical details of the company's proposals as they would affect various grades, and consequently to be rather opaque to a reader outside the company.

Thus, all three companies were affected by similar issues of restructuring, competition, and privatisation. Even in the case of the Royal Mail, which remained in the public sector, privatisation had been under active consideration by the Conservative administration, and would have been welcomed, according to employees whom I interviewed, by its senior management. Redundancy had been a major issue in two of the companies, while a harsh disciplinary regime proved to be a matter of controversy in the Royal Mail. It is against this background that the companies were seeking to communicate with their

employees, employing a variety of methods in several of Marchington's categories (1992). It is perhaps possible that the atmosphere of change and insecurity which made communication so necessary to the companies also contributed to the oppositional decoding which I found to predominate in the focus groups.

Another feature which linked all three companies was that they were unionised. Indeed, in two of the companies, BT and the Royal Mail, union density was extremely high, standing at over 95% for postmen and women and BT engineers. While union density at GPT was lower, especially in white-collar grades, recognition had been maintained. Consequently, in all three companies, trade unions were able to put alternative viewpoints to those of management. It could perhaps be conjectured that a more positive response to management communication might have been found in a non-unionised company or in one such as Nissan where the union had adopted a stance of cooperation with management. However, the findings of Garrahan and Stewart (1992) and Graham (1994) indicate that a collaborative union stance, or even the absence of a union, does not necessarily indicate a positive employee attitude towards the company.

Information about the companies was drawn from contemporary press reports, from union material in my possession (in the case of GPT), from internal material made available to me, and from interviews with senior lay and full-time trade union officials. Especially important in this were semi-structured interviews carried out with senior lay officials. Interviews with professional officials gave valuable background information, but are not directly cited in the research.

The interviews with lay officials were based on two questionnaires. (These are given in appendices 2 and 3.) The first enquired about the union organization within the workplace; the second, based on the categories developed by

Marchington and his colleagues (1992), sought to determine what forms of employee involvement were used within the workplace. The questionnaires served as an *aide memoire* for the interview, and were not handed to interviewees for them to complete. In conducting the interviews, I was prepared to allow the conversation to "flow", not necessarily following the order of the questionnaire if , for example, an interviewee volunteered some information out of the predetermined order. I retained all of Marchington's categories, including those which did not have immediate and obvious relevance to communication. This proved useful, for relevant information was often volunteered in response to questions about these categories, especially forms of financial employee involvement. I included an additional question about trade union responses to corporate communication, and also added a question about company video and audio tapes. The information gathered was useful in its own right, and also raised my awareness of issues which would need to be discussed in the focus groups.

A personnel manager was also interviewed, under conditions of anonymity. His remarks do not form a separate section, but are mentioned where they appeared relevant. I have considered it appropriate, for reasons which I cannot discuss without risk to his anonymity, to accept assertions of fact in these remarks as being true and opinions expressed as genuinely reflecting the personnel manager's viewpoint.

Some caveats are necessary because of my reliance on trade union contacts. All of the companies are, of course, unionised, and the findings may not reflect the situation in non-unionised firms. All participants were volunteers, approached by senior union representatives and invited to participate, and are perhaps more likely to be "union-minded" and to have an oppositional stance than their colleagues. On the other hand, senior representatives did assure me of their efforts to find as representative a group of their colleagues as possible. In the case

of the Royal Mail, the level of support for the 1996 strikes perhaps indicates that the attitude of interviewees was not atypical. It is also perhaps noteworthy that in several cases focus group participants or individual senior representatives who were interviewed explicitly referred to a general view of the members in their workplace. (Participants were in fact invited when possible to prepare for attendance at the focus group meeting by prior discussion with their colleagues.) Overall, perhaps, this emphasis on trade union members is no more disadvantageous to objectivity than the emphasis placed on management objectives by Sackmann (1991) or Blyler and Thralls (1993).

3.3 The texts

An immediate restriction on the choice of items of communication was my own understanding of material generated in the companies. Even in the case of GPT, there had been change since I had left the company, and I could perhaps have missed some nuance of meaning. It is possible that conflict may lie in items about even an apparently consensual matter such as health and safety, as for example, the failure to mention safety representatives in a 1992 GPT publication, and the appearance of the item about safety within weeks of the redundancy of the regional safety manager. However, in examining items from BT and the Royal Mail, I chose to use articles in which a potential conflict was apparent to an outsider.

In the case of the Royal Mail, I chose the front-page articles from the *Courier*, the organisation's monthly newspaper, in June and July, 1996. These issues had appeared respectively before and after the beginning of a series of strikes. They appeared to offer interesting linguistic contrasts and to embody complex, conflicting purposes, in that they sought to draw a distinction between the union and its members on the one hand and employees on the other, in a situation

where almost all employees were union members. They appeared to offer marked differences of tone, in that the June article saw the dispute as a mutual problem to be solved, while the July article assumed a much more entrenched position. (In the event, the focus group discussion indicated that this distinction was not perceived by employees.) The articles were also clear examples of a narrative, journalistic genre, written from a purportedly neutral stance by a journalist who referred to participants in the third person, while drawing upon direct speech by the managing director and, in the June article, the union's general secretary. They therefore offered a number of linguistic features for possible analysis and decoding.

In BT, I chose a single item, a letter from the managing director of a business division announcing possible job reductions. This item, even in a company which had been very successful in avoiding compulsory redundancy and which paid relatively generous severance pay to volunteers, showed potentially interesting conflicts between the need to reassure potentially redundant employees and maintaining the morale of employees whose jobs were currently safe. The article, as a letter rather than an item in a company publication, also offered potentially interesting linguistic features. It stood alone, with no immediate possible influence from an intertextual reading of other articles in the same magazine; it lacked any non-linguistic features of page layout or illustration to influence decoding, and it was directly addressed by the managing director to his subordinates. In the event, it also proved to be unique among the articles discussed in being addressed to only part of the company's workforce. The focus group which discussed this item did in fact include some employees who did not work within the business division to which it was addressed, although this did not appear as an important issue in its decoding.

The GPT items were not produced under the same circumstances of present or potential crisis. I chose two items from the same issue of the magazine *GPT Challenge*, which is described as an "employee development publication". I chose items which contrasted in genre - an authored article by the managing director and a news report of the introduction of NVQs on the Liverpool shopfloor. The former offered an example of direct exhortation to engage in training, sharing with the BT letter direct personal address from managing director to subordinates, but differing in purpose and style, and also being placed in the context of a magazine rather than standing alone. The latter shared with the Royal Mail articles a journalistic genre, but were not written in the crisis atmosphere of a potential, and then an actual, strike. The two articles also appeared to be relevant to different sections of the company's workforce - to graduate engineers and shopfloor workers, while appearing in the same magazine which was distributed to all employees. There also appeared to be hidden conflict around the company's attitude to training and the usefulness of NVQs.

I chose to concentrate on print media for several reasons. Such media were readily available, and would be more readily discussed in writing than media such as video, where lengthy descriptions of action or attempts to indicate nuances of speech would be necessary. Among the three companies, only one had in fact made any major use of video. There was even less evidence for any substantial use of electronic media to communicate with the workforce. While all three companies have websites, they all clearly have potential customers as their target audience, rather than the workforce. (Appendix 1 gives further details of findings regarding electronic communication.)

The principle focus of the work was, of course, upon the interpretation of these texts by their intended recipients; hence discussion with employees in focus groups concentrated primarily upon their own employer's communication.

However, in each case I did ask each group briefly to discuss a text from another company. The purpose was to gain some insight into the process by which employees decoded texts. Did this rest entirely upon their knowledge of their own employer, with a favourable or unfavourable decoding of an item stemming just from their experience of working for that company and the perceived match or mismatch of the article with their lived experience? Or would there be a more general, "portable" linguistic competence, which would serve equally well in the decoding of an item from another company?

For this part of the work, I asked the GPT Coventry group to discuss the BT letter and the GPT Liverpool group to discuss the June article from the Royal Mail *Courier*. The BT group and the Royal Mail group both discussed Mr Cobbe's front-page article from *GPT Challenge*. (I avoided the use of the item about the Liverpool NVQs as a control text, feeling that it might be too technically specific to make sense to external readers.) The results, discussed in the case studies, were rather mixed, but inclined to show that workers could more readily decode a piece which bore some relation to their own work.

3.4 Analysing texts

In developing analytic tools for the examination of the linguistic content of the items chosen for close study, I drew upon the work of critical linguists, and especially Fowler and Fairclough. In this analysis, I concentrated on aspects of critical linguistics which appeared to me most likely to offer possibilities for discussion in the focus groups and to be useful in understanding employees' decoding of communication. I outline this here.

Transitivity

This concept is rather different from the definition of transitive and intransitive verbs in traditional grammar, depending on whether or not they take an object. Fowler (1991) outlines several sorts of event which may be conveyed by the verb of a clause. Among these are:

1. action - which may be represented by a verb traditionally described as transitive (shoot, hit) or intransitive (run, sit);
2. process (sink - used intransitively);
3. state (be, remain, etc. often omitted in headlines);
4. mental process (think, meditate);
5. verbal action (declare, say).

The participants in an event are also described in terms which seek greater precision than the 'subject' and 'object' of traditional grammar. The semantic subject may be an **agent**, a term used for persons and animals, or a **force**, which is the name applied by Fowler to inanimate subjects of clauses such as earthquakes or explosions. The semantic object may be, among other things:

1. a **patient**, the human being (or animal) which has something done to them;
2. a **result**, coming into being as a consequence of the action (e.g. "cars" in "BMW workers produced 3000 more cars last month.");
3. a **beneficiary**.

It should be noted that these terms are used semantically, rather than syntactically. Thus, for example, the patient may be the syntactic subject of the clause, most commonly by a passive transformation of the clause, but also as the subject of a verb such as "die", or the beneficiary may appear as the subject of a verb such as "earn". Occasionally, there may be ambiguity, as for example with the verb "train", where a case could be made that the persons trained are either patients or beneficiaries.

Syntactic transformations

While transitivity is concerned with the semantic analysis of the clause, **transformation** refers to syntactic variation. Fowler suggests two transformations which are of particular interest for critical linguistics: passive and nominal.

The **passive** transformation switches the noun phrases of the clause so that the patient becomes the syntactic subject of the clause, occupying the normal position of an agent. While the active voice focuses on the agent, the passive allows its omission. The passive, especially when the agent is omitted, can be an ideologically powerful transformation, disguising responsibility for actions.

Nominalization is a frequent feature of English. This means that a predicate is "realised syntactically as a noun" (Fowler 1991: p 79). The resulting nominalization can then be used as the subject of a clause, a feature which is prominent in the article by Tony Cobbe analysed below. Some nominalizations are derived from verbs - e.g. 'allegation' from 'allege'; others are not so derived - e.g. 'campaign', 'dialogue', 'sanction'. (Fowler does not note that some such nominalizations come into use as verbs.) Nominalization deletes many features of the predicate it replaces, including participants, time (by the omission of tense) and modality (which could indicate the author's view of the truth or falsehood of a full clause). Fowler finds that nominalization can be used for mystification through "concealment .... of power relations and writers' attitudes" (1991: p 80). He also notes its use for reification, so that processes effectively become things.

Vocabulary

Fowler introduces his consideration of vocabulary by outlining a "very useful distinction in philosophical semantics" (1991: p 81) in examining the meaning of words: the difference between reference and sense. **Reference** is the relationship between a word or phrase and the real world experienced by the speaker, listener, writer or reader. Thus, in Fowler's example, the word 'dog' calls to mind Rover or Fido. **Sense**, however, "defines meaning as a relationship *between words* rather than between words and the world" (1991: p 81). Again using Fowler's example, 'dog', the word is defined as "not horse", "more general than Alsatian, less general than mammal". I shall be suggesting later in this thesis that reference is more important than sense in workers' decoding of communication from their employer. Participants in the focus groups, and individual senior representatives who were interviewed, invariably interpreted vocabulary in terms of their own experience of work within the organisation.

Two ideologically important lexical processes mentioned by Fowler are **re-lexicalization** and **over-lexicalization**. The former is "the promotion of a new term where it is claimed that a new concept is at issue". (1991: p 84) Fowler cites the use of the term 'social ownership' by the Labour Party in 1986; a more recent example would be the same party's short-lived enthusiasm for 'stakeholding'. **Over-lexicalization** is defined as "the existence of an excess of quasi-synonymous terms for entities and ideas which are a particular preoccupation or problem in the culture's discourse." (1991: p 85) Such terms may often be pejorative (e.g. the previously cited example of 'lout', etc.) Fairclough (1989) prefers the terms "re-wording" and "over-wording" for these concepts. He draws attention to the use of re-wording (re-lexicalization) to challenge a dominant ideology, for example by applying negative terms such as "exploitation" to the activities of businesses.

In some cases, re-lexicalization can be carried to its extreme in what I shall call **lexical inversion**. By this I understand the deliberate reversal of the general understanding of a term by its application to an unusual subject. For example, left newspapers may apply the term 'scroungers' to the royal family, 'thugs' to police officers, or 'terrorism' to the activities of the armed forces of western powers. I have sometimes found examples of this in trade union communication, although it did not arise in any of the case studies in this thesis.

Modality

In Fowler's words, modality:

> can informally be regarded as 'comment' or 'attitude', obviously by definition ascribable to the source of the text, and explicit or implicit in the linguistic stance taken by the speaker/writer. (1991: p 85)

I follow Fowler in distinguishing four types of modality:

1. **Truth** - indication of the level of certainty or uncertainty which the speaker/writer has (or purports to have) in the veracity of the material. In the case of absolute certainty, this may not involve any explicit terminology, since a declarative sentence usually implies the truth of the proposition which it advances. This modality may also be indicated by some adverbs ('certainly', 'probably', 'perhaps', etc.) or modal adjectives ('it is unlikely that....').
2. **Obligation** - indication of what the speaker/writer believes ought to be done. This modality will frequently use the modal verbs "ought" or "must".
3. **Permission** - speaker/writer bestows permission to do something.
4. **Desirability** - speaker/writer approves or disapproves of what is described in the text. This modality may also use modal verbs, but it may equally use terms such as 'right' or 'wrong'. In tabloid newspapers, more robust terms may be used, for example, describing actions or opinions as 'barmy' or 'loony'.

Speech acts

This term is used by Fowler to refer to an "utterance (which) literally effects the act referred to". (1991: p 88) The most obvious examples are formal and ritualistic - "I name this ship *Ark Royal*."; "I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of five pounds." - but Fowler points out that speech acts are by no means confined to such uses. In the context of corporate communications, speech acts are to be found in the public relations department's statement "ABC Cars today announced the launch of a new family saloon", where the announcement constitutes the launch. Similarly, the personnel director's statement that "The company regrets to announce five hundred redundancies" sets in motion the process of redundancy. In practice, I found that speech acts were of little importance in the samples of communication which were closely studied in this research.

Direct address

The use of **direct address** to the audience may give particularly immediacy and authority to an item of communication. The forms which this may take may include "editorialising", with a named senior manager addressing himself to the audience, as in the item by Tony Cobbe in *GPT Challenge*, or the use of direct speech, quoting workers or managers in the course of articles.

Personal pronouns

Among the linguistic features which were examined were the use of **personal pronouns**, especially "we" and "you", which often carry profound ideological meaning in identifying the audience with the viewpoint of the speaker/writer. This proved to be an important aspect of the work, since material in all three case studies made use especially of the first person plural for this purpose.

Fairclough (1989) distinguishes two uses of the first person plural - an **inclusive** use which includes the addressee within the same group as the speaker or writer ('we' the nation, the company including all employees) and an **exclusive** use in which the addressee is not so included ('we' the government, the management as against the trade union side in negotiations). I believe that a third category is needed, to cover the situation where 'we' does not include the speaker/writer, and 'we' effectively means 'you'. A good example of this is the usage popular among Conservative politicians a few years ago, "paying ourselves more than we earn". The traditional grammar exercise of converting to the singular gives the improbable "paying myself more than I earn". Since this usage of the first person excludes the speaker but includes the audience, I shall call it the **disguised second person.**

While the second person did not play so large an ideological role in the examples analysed as part of the case study, it was noticeable that it was used in a potentially mystificatory way: sometimes addressed to the whole audience as a collective, sometimes to the individual employee, and sometimes indefinitely (i.e. where 'one' or 'people' might be substituted).

The role of the recipient

Critical linguistics recognises that all speakers and writers take choices, consciously or not, in their use of language, selecting from a range of options in vocabulary and syntax. I have sought in this research to examine also the role of the **recipient** (reader, listener, etc.) in the interpretation of corporate communication. Taking into account concepts such as members' resources, the present work investigates the extent to which employees make an explicit or implicit linguistic decoding of the material to which I had applied critical analysis.

The choice of vocabulary by speakers or writers is generally understood, and has in fact become cliché in the phrase "Your 'terrorist' can be my 'freedom fighter'." However, listeners or readers may not be so aware of syntactic decisions which inhibit, for example, the use of the verb "kill" in the active voice, when the subject is forces regarded as legitimate by the author. (Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) give an example of this from the period of white rule in Rhodesia.)

I propose that similar inbuilt suppositions and power relations are to be found in corporate communication. Certain management prerogatives are taken for granted - for example, the right to engage or dismiss employees - by both company media and general news media reporting on their activities. (An analogy with the military example given by Kress and Van Leeuwen would be the general reluctance of the news media to say that a company "sacked" a number of workers.) Again, corporate media take for granted - or purport to take for granted - a shared interest between employer and employee in the prosperity of the company. I suggest that critical linguistic analysis of examples of corporate communication can give an important insight into these assumptions, penetrating beneath the often bland surface of corporate communication to find evidence of underlying tension, contradiction and conflict.

If the techniques of critical linguistic analysis can be applied to corporate communication by the academic researcher, do the intended audience of employees have similar tools at their disposal? I sought to address this point in the research. I have suggested, in reviewing the literature on critical linguistics, that it allows a "privileged" access to the ways in which corporate communication seeks to persuade its target audience to share the corporate view. Would employees be able, without a background of training in linguistics, to understand the manner in which linguistic structures sought to persuade them? If they were in fact able to carry out such a decoding, would employees be ready to

make explicit such an ability to a researcher? In effect, I sought to investigate whether there existed a "folk linguistics" deployed by workers to decode corporate communication. I now turn to the method used to investigate this possibility.

3.5 The focus groups

This last part of the work was carried out by means of focus group discussions. The aim was to discover what were participants' attitudes towards communication in general - whether the methods of communication used by the employers succeeded or failed in gaining employee commitment to organisational objectives - and how participants interpreted specific samples of communication. This part of the work involved an attempt to discover what explicit or implicit understanding of linguistics the participants brought to their decoding of corporate communication and their subsequent acceptance or rejection of its message.

Focus groups were chosen in preference to a series of interviews with individual employees in order to benefit from the dynamic of the group and to allow the expression of alternative views by people with direct knowledge of the employing organization and its methods of communication. The groups were of the type known as "affinity groups": the participants in each group were colleagues who knew each other. While there is some reluctance to use such groups in commercial work, such as focus groups discussing the marketing of a product, they were both easier to recruit and seemed more likely to develop the desired group dynamic than an artificially selected group of workers from each company who had previously been unknown to each other.

In each case, after introducing myself to the participants, I outlined the proposed plan for the interview, which would fall into three broad areas: their view of communication in general, a specific examination of one or two items of communication from their employer, and a brief examination of a control text from another employer. The focus group were told that there were no "right or wrong answers" and that if they showed my previous ideas about their company to be completely wrong, this would in no way be offensive, but would constitute a research result. In all cases except the BT group, the materials to be discussed had been circulated in advance, with a covering letter giving the proposed plan and an invitation to participants to discuss the topics with their colleagues before the meeting.

In conducting the interviews, a "funnel" technique was used, beginning with a general question, and moving to more specific questions as necessary. In the case of the company's communication in general, an invitation to speak about "the way that the company communicates with you - team briefings, quality circles, or whatever" always sufficed to begin a lively discussion, which only needed to be interrupted by requests for points of clarification about matters specific to that company. Occasionally, the additional information was peripheral to the company's communication but important for my understanding of the background, as for example in the case of what the postal workers perceived as a harsh disciplinary regime in the Royal Mail.

Throughout the interviews, conversation was allowed to flow freely as far as possible, so that, for example, the members were able to initiate discussion about a matter where I had prepared a question which I had intended to use later in the interview. This allowed participants to introduce aspects of linguistic analysis unprompted, as happened for example in the GPT Liverpool group, where

participant S initiated discussion of the use of the first person plural as an indicator of a common interest between employer and employees.

In discussing the linguistic content of items of communication, the same method was followed, although it was usually necessary in this part of the discussion to direct attention specifically to particular aspects of language. Since none of the participants (except presumably one graduate in modern languages in the Coventry group) had formal training in grammar or linguistics, I avoided the technical terminology of linguistics. Typically, I would ask why the group felt a particular form of words was used, or who 'we' were in an article, followed up if necessary by asking if 'we' were the same people in all occurrences. An exercise which proved useful in some of the interviews was to re-transform a construction, typically a nominalization, agentless passive or a clause in which responsibility was attributed to a non-human subject such as market forces which had avoided attribution of human agency, so that human agency was explicit, and to ask the group what difference this made. This enabled participants to whom linguistic concepts such as the agentless passive and nominalization were unknown to demonstrate that they nevertheless understood the underlying purpose of these transformations.

In discussing the control text, conduct of the interview depended very much upon the initial understanding displayed by the group. For this purpose, I regard a high level of understanding of a control text as being one which coincided closely with the interpretation placed upon the text by employees in the company from which it originated. Discussion of this item was always fairly brief, coming as it did at the end of a discussion lasting an hour or more. In two interviews, GPT Liverpool and the Royal Mail, the group seriously misinterpreted the control text. In these circumstances, little further questioning was possible. In the other groups, questions were general, concentrating on content. The BT group

nevertheless volunteered sophisticated linguistic comment on the control text, which in their case was the article by Mr Cobbe from *GPT Challenge*. It is perhaps important to note that there was no necessary correlation between a group's ability to decode a text from another company and a readiness to make explicit its linguistic knowledge. The GPT Coventry group were very reluctant to speak about linguistic issues, but nevertheless interpreted the BT text in much the same way as BT employees did. Ability to interpret the control text appeared to be related to the similarity of the work in the other company to one's own, with BT and GPT employees finding it relatively easy to interpret items from each other's company, while postmen found it difficult to interpret material intended for GPT workers and vice versa.

An unexpected aspect of the focus groups, discussed more fully in the GPT case study (Chapter 4), was the reluctance of the members of GPT focus groups, and especially that in Coventry, to speak explicitly about their linguistic knowledge. An explicitly linguistic question usually - almost invariably in the case of the Coventry group - received an answer which looked beyond the semantic or syntactic point I raised to what they seemed to regard as a more important underlying issue of industrial relations. I attributed this to my former relationship with these interviewees as a colleague and senior trade union representative. Interestingly, since the research was completed, this interpretation has been confirmed by participant G in the Coventry group. On meeting him again, I mentioned my initial disappointment at the group's reluctance to talk about the language used in the examples of communication we had discussed. G replied explicitly that they had "not thought about you as a researcher, but as a union rep". The effect of this understanding on interpretation of this focus group is discussed below. Linguistically, however, it does raise yet another aspect of communication - the extent to which participants' contribution to discourse is conditioned by their understanding of the interests of their interlocutor.

Chapter 4 Case Study 1 - GPT

4.1 Context - the company

GPT has already been the subject of some scholarly interest, most notably the work of Thompson (1983, and his later work with Bannon, 1984). More recently, the anonymous telecommunications company studied by Roberts and Corcoran-Nantes (1995) is eaily identified as GPT.

Thompson (1983) examines some of the limits to deskilling and the anomalies which arise. He notes the polarisation of a workforce with the introduction of entirely new technology and a consequent demand for a higher proportion of technical white-collar workers at Plessey, Liverpool. (This factory, now part of GPT, was also the subject of his work with Bannon (1984).) He reviews various methods of control over the workforce, and says:

> Many schemes of participation and enrichment offer little or nothing that is new, and are often disguised forms of intensified control and rationalisation of the labour process. (1983: p 141)

After citing Burawoy (1979) in criticism of Braverman's lack of attention to the manner in which consent is achieved, he looks at the way in which informal control processes, such as "making out", may play a part in ensuring consent, perhaps diverting conflict towards other groups of employees as they blame one another for problems. Thompson sees "making out" at Plessey as directed against the company, but his later work with Bannon (1984) may cast some doubt on this, and could rather point up a major weakness in shop-floor culture at Plessey. Militancy tended - and still tends at GPT's Liverpool plant today - to end at the factory gate. This may reflect a situation where informal shop-floor

practices are tacitly accepted as constituting "misbehaviour", and workers cannot conceptualise their resistance in such a way as to legitimise it.

Among factors which he believes Burawoy to understate, Thompson includes regionalism, of which he notes:

> It is normally one of the predictable events of the industrial relations calendar for Merseyside (Vauxhall) workers to travel in coaches to Luton to lobby their colleagues against accepting the latest pay offer. They invariably fail. (1983: p 174)

A similar situation prevailed in GPT after the merger, involving the Liverpool Plessey plant, which formed that company in 1988. At the time of the merger, I was senior representative for the MSF trade union in the GEC Telecommunications plant at Coventry, which formed part of the same merger. The Liverpool unions, not without some reason, saw themselves as the elite brigade of the movement within the company. They were certainly more willing to take industrial action than their Coventry colleagues. Darlington (1994) has also examined the question of militancy in Merseyside plants. I anticipated that regionalism would be relevant in the reaction to corporate communication of GPT employees in Liverpool and Coventry.

4.2 Context - communication

The company has a substantial personnel function. In 1993, the Coventry region was the base of the corporate personnel director and a further director responsible for the Coventry sites. Eight personnel managers had responsibility for various business divisions or specialist areas. These managers were assisted by secretarial and clerical staff. Other sites had similar arrangements, and responsibilities sometimes overlapped, so that, for example, some personnel managers based in Liverpool had responsibility for staff in the same division based in Coventry. (By 1997, some rationalisation of the personnel function had

taken place, with PNG's personnel department being removed from the business division and placed within the central corporate structure.) Additional staff handled public relations and the production of in-house newspapers and magazines. There was a history of the introduction, and subsequent quiet dropping, of a number of initiatives for communication with employees and gaining their support. Among these had been Quality Improvement Groups (QIGs), and Developing Organizational Capability (DOC). The Professional Engineering Career Structure (PECS) was still in operation after three years in 1996, and Enhancing Operational Capability (EOC) had recently been launched. These initiatives had been the subject of some cynicism among employees, and the trade unions had sought to play on this with leaflets attributing the plethora of abbreviations to the company's "Fatuous Acronym Research Team".

Despite this vast apparatus, the company had a distinctly penny-pinching attitude towards the basics of day-to-day communication, normally re-using envelopes for internal communication. This economy led to a spectacular blunder when a personnel manager was interrupted after addressing an envelope to the MSF senior representative, to deal with a more urgent matter involving a redundancy. Failing to notice that he had already addressed the envelope, he used it again for a confidential document, which went to the senior union representative. Among other things, the document referred explicitly to the need to tread more carefully in Liverpool because of likely union reaction.

4.3 GPT - Industrial relations and employee involvement

The description which follows is in part based upon material available to me from my time as a senior representative or subsequently acquired. It also draws upon interviews with current senior representatives in the Coventry plant. The interviews covered union organisation within the plant and the categories of employee involvement used by Marchington and his colleagues. In this company, two interviews were carried out with senior lay representatives at Coventry, in late 1995 and early 1997. Three officials were interviewed (S, B and M), B having been present at both meetings. Notes taken at the earlier meeting (with B and S) were updated in the light of the second meeting (with B and M). Statistics for union membership refer to the Coventry sites. Where the situation had changed between the two interviews, this is indicated below.

4.3.1 Union organization

The company recognised trade unions except for managerial grades. However, the interviewees had some difficulty in defining a "manager", since engineering areas employed many people in minor supervisory roles as team or group leaders on grades for which the union was recognised. The company employed about 3000 people in Coventry at the time of the interviews.

The interviewees felt unable to give separate figures for "managers", and suggested the following figures for employment and union density (in 1995):

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF WKRS	% MEMBERSHIP OF UNION	RECOGNISED?
Mgrs/Tech	2200	25%	Mgr - N; Tech - Y (MSF)
Clerical	180	50%	Yes (APEX/ACTS)
Manual	600	90%	Yes (AEEU/TGWU)

ACTS and TGWU, while retaining members in the company, did not really function. Neither union had had a senior representative or convenor for several years.

In Liverpool, union density was somewhat higher, especially in technical areas. Technical and clerical workers at Liverpool were also represented by MSF and APEX (white-collar section of the GMB) respectively. However, MSF also represented some shopfloor workers in Liverpool, and the GMB's manual section also had representation on the shopfloor.

In 1997, M reported that there was difficulty in recruiting to the union new employees, often brought into the company after a period of unemployment, sometimes having previously been made redundant by GPT. Such employees found the pay better than that they had previously received and were less willing than longer serving employees to raise objections around conditions.

B reported that in the case of a small group called Card Technology, although the company was willing to allow representation by a (non-existent) local representative, they were not willing to allow her to represent them. This was to be referred to the full-time official. Staff unions had traditionally had a single senior representative covering all Coventry sites, of which two now survived. In 1992, the company had indicated that it was no longer prepared to recognise the MSF senior representative on both sites, and had formally withdrawn his or her full-time union facilities. In practice, MSF had maintained *de facto* full-time representation until the dismissal (by redundancy) of the then senior representative (the present writer) in November 1993.

There was some considerable doubt about the level of union recognition generally, in that no collectively bargained and negotiated pay rise had been achieved since 1991. Bonuses and performance-related pay were "non-negotiable", and the unions in the Coventry site, at least, appeared to have been reduced to *de facto* representational recognition only. By 1997, B and M thought that the situation had deteriorated, in that managers were even less willing to negotiate with the unions, and they found that very often the managers to whom they spoke lacked the authority to give a definite answer on behalf of the company. (See also remarks on downward communication, below.)

4.3.2 Employee involvement

Downward communication

Company newspapers

Several were produced, including one at group level, for the whole of GEC. Within GPT, newspapers were produced on a divisional basis, rather than geographically. A "new" publication had followed the merger which had formed PNG, and it replaced the former TSG and NSG newspapers, which had been

available for some considerable time. In 1997, B and M reported the introduction of a quarterly booklet called *Response*, designed to answer queries from employees. They felt that this was usurping the function of communication through the unions, instancing a query raised about the differing prices of drinks in different factories, raised by the unions but answered by an announcement in *Response*. It had been indicated to them by a manager that a question from union representatives about overtime rates would also probably be answered in the same way. The manager seemed uncomprehending when it was suggested to him that dissatisfaction about the standardisation of drinks prices might have been averted if he had replied through union channels and negotiation. Less formal publications had been produced at local level.

The journals appeared two-monthly or quarterly, and were produced by the company's publications department.

Internal publications were sometimes seen by Coventry employees as excessively oriented towards events at, and the interests of, the Liverpool site. S reported that employees in his department threw away their divisional newspaper after only a cursory glance, except the edition which gave details of the hierarchical "family tree" of the division.

The company rarely made use of video, and had not issued a video for employees for about five years. Audio tapes of talks by directors were distributed, although these were primarily intended for managers. These had been introduced in the time of the previous managing director.

Employee report

None was produced. A report for the whole of GEC had, however, been produced when the company had been GEC Telecommunications.

Briefing system

There had "always" been some form of briefing system, but it varied very much in practice. In 1995, I was told that in the smaller of the two factories in Coventry, the manager with overall responsibility for the site, Mr Walsh, briefed workers monthly. Elsewhere, the briefing took the more common form of a cascade, with lower levels of management briefing shop-floor or office workers.

It was reported that the then new managing director of PNG, Mr Parton, planned a series of briefings for all employees, at which he would speak to them in a series of meetings held off-site at a local hotel. This process had begun. Interestingly, the factory manager, Mr Walsh, had been delegated by his subordinates to ask questions. His area of responsibility included 500 of the 600 manual workers, and the decision seemed to reflect trust in Mr Walsh generated by his regular briefing of all employees, and a belief that he was more articulate than most shop-floor workers were. B reported that Mr Walsh asked all questions which were given to him, even if they would be unwelcome to his superiors.

When I carried out the second interview in 1997, Mr Parton had by now left the company, with the managing director, Tony Cobbe, taking direct responsibility for PNG. Mr Walsh had been promoted to director of manufacturing. B and M reported that he called in the unions and gave them the briefing. There was not, however, any formal union presence in the sectional briefings. A cascade format continued to be used, and had by now been extended into Mr Walsh's former area of responsibility. Local information now included features such as a welcome to new recruits, congratulations on the birth of children, wishes for a speedy recovery for employees who were ill, and so on.

B and S mentioned also the appointment of management counsellors for potentially redundant employees. They were unhappy about this practice, which they felt could be "pushing the unions out of the door".

Briefings were give at a variety of levels, from company-wide down to individual groups, with increasing levels of detail as one moved down the chain. The system was not foolproof. The former TSG had in fact failed to gain an Investors in People award because of failures to brief people.

Worker opinions of the briefing system varied considerably. This seemed to depend very much on the individual manager's ability to give the briefing, give answers to questions immediately or find the answers. Mr Walsh's factory appeared to rate most highly in 1995, although by 1997 the results of financial EI (see below) were adversely affecting relationships between management and workers.

Trade union response

The trade unions had previously published regular newsletters (approximately fortnightly), which had responded when appropriate to errors or controversial statements in company newspapers and briefings. This had ceased, however, with the effective withdrawal of full-time facilities in 1993. Now that all lay officials were spending some time working in their departments, there was no opportunity to produce regular leaflets. The union now only produced bulletins on an *ad hoc* basis, and only responded to company publications if there was "something drastic". B and S instanced an encomium of praise for the working environment in Coventry, which generated considerable cynicism and anger. Leaflets were produced on a joint unions basis, rather than individually by separate unions.

Upward problem solving

Suggestion schemes

How these worked varied form site to site and department to department. For example, at Poole a financial reward had been given for a suggestion that pencils should be sharpened from time to time, while at Coventry a suggestion for improving safety had gone unrewarded since no manager "owned" it and would allow it on his budget. Some managers were using the scheme as a way of giving a pay rise.

Attitude surveys

These were not used.

Quality circles

They no longer formally existed. B and S could suggest no reason for their demise other than that they had "gone out of fashion" in the company. However, it appeared from focus group responses that something akin to quality circles survived in the company's Secure Communication Systems division and in Liverpool.

TQM

The slightly cynical response when I asked whether TQM existed in the company was, "That's what they say." TQM had been in use in the company since about 1990. Worker attitudes varied from cynicism to "thinking it's brilliant". The latter attitude had prevailed in Mr Walsh's factory at the time of the 1995 interview. B ascribed the success of TQM to the bonus paid there on a unit basis, where it paid workers to "manage themselves", police their colleagues and hunt anyone incompetent out of a job. Sickness levels were the lowest in the company at 4%. She perceived what was happening in the area as "heavy indoctrination, but they

are actually getting more money", although she believed they were working very hard for it.

By 1997, this seemed to have changed considerably, especially with bonuses upon which employees relied not paying out as expected. (See also financial EI below.)

Financial employee involvement

In 1995, the interviewees described the situation as follows, for managers, technical, clerical and manual workers:

FEATURE	MGRS	TECH	CLER	MANU
Individual bonuses	Y(?)	Y	N	N
Perf-rel pay	Y	Y	Y	Y
Share options	Y	?	?	?
Share purchase scheme	Y	Y	Y	Y
Profit sharing	Y	Y	Y	Y
Unit bonuses	?	Y	?	Y

Profit sharing took the form of an annual bonus. Views were mixed. Some saw the schemes as "unprofessional", while others participated happily.

By 1997, three separate bonus schemes applied to some manufacturing-related employees in the Helen Street factory. M estimated that these amounted to about a third of people's wages. A belief that the schemes were being operated in such a way as to penalise workers for delays which were outside their control had led recently to an unofficial stoppage and sit-in in Helen Street.

Representative participation

JCC or work council

None existed.

Collective bargaining

This nominally existed, but see the remarks on union organization, above. What bargaining there was took place at Coventry level, with no national bargaining.

The view of the interviewees was that the introduction of the EI schemes had had considerable effect on collective bargaining. Mainly, this was the effect of financial EI rather than forms of communication. B said that the company "doesn't negotiate". From the trade union side it was "very difficult" to deliver, when the company was not even making offers in response to claims, but was telling people individually what they were being offered. It was difficult for me to judge how much of this was "new", since B attributed the difficulty in part at least to the longstanding relative weakness of unionism in the Coventry sites. She explicitly mentioned the situation in 1993, when Chorley shop stewards had been able to instruct their members to hand back individual pay rises, and accept only a commonly negotiated rise. This would have been impossible in Coventry. Liverpool also had a tradition of much greater militancy than Coventry, and a threat to strike at that site was taken seriously by management. Again, the 1993 pay round had given an instance of this when limited industrial action and a ballot for an all-out strike in Liverpool had gained a negotiated increase. By contrast, it was virtually impossible in Coventry to get people to a mass meeting. It is difficult to judge to what extent financial EI was responsible for this state of affairs. It seemed to have exacerbated an existing situation of trade union weakness. Neither B nor S attributed the weakness directly to corporate communications, although B's remarks about "indoctrination" in Mr Walsh's area seemed to indicate that there was an element of success in his communication with his subordinates. Even there, however, B had attributed the success largely to the fact that TQM seemed to be "working" in providing higher shop-floor earnings.

Change programme

I explained the terminology as defined by Marchington et al. (1992). The interviewees spoke about the change programme in the company. Mission statements were issued at every level from the company to individual sections. People were asked to recite mission statements as part of the judging process for IIP. This was not the subject of an agreement with the union. All of this, S said, was connected with Customer Focus (a TQM scheme).

Reactions were mixed - from cynicism (e.g. calling Customer Focus "Customer F.O.") to going along with the scheme. Some oddities were mentioned, such as not allowing men to wear shorts in hot weather in shop-floor areas, while similarly informal dress passed without comment in some engineering areas. (This may perhaps reflect a view in some software areas that employees are working in the computer industry, rather than the telecommunications industry, with a consequently relaxed attitude to business clothing.)

4.4 The publication

GPT Challenge is one of several magazines published within the company. These range from *Topic*, the magazine for the whole GEC group, through publications distributed throughout the GPT subsidiary, such as this one, to magazines aimed at particular sites or divisions, such as the small Dagenham factory with its 800 employees. *GPT Challenge* deals specifically with employee development. It is an eight-page publication in A4 format, printed in black and two shades of blue (matching the company's logo and the livery of its vehicles), and is illustrated with colour photographs.

The first article, by the managing director Tony Cobbe, occupies all of the front page, except for the title and tags to two other stories, and continues on the

second page. It is accompanied by a portrait of Mr Cobbe. It is one of sixteen items in the magazine, and one of five which may generally be categorized as direct exhortation to better performance. (I have deliberately drawn this category narrowly, since performance improvement underlies several other items of news in the magazine.) It is perhaps noteworthy that the most overtly exhortatory material appears on the front and back covers of the magazine. I selected the Cobbe piece, as a clear example of this category of article, as one of the passages for discussion by the focus groups.

Three items give general news about the company without concentrating on individuals. The final eight stories are about people. Four are work-related stories about company employees. One is a story about an employee's involvement in a round-the-world yacht race. The final three, all found on page six, are about young people visiting or sponsored by the company, and are clearly intended to impress the reader with the company's responsible attitude towards the community.

There appears to be an attempt to cover people at all levels within the company. The second article analysed below, for example, is about National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), dealing with developments on the shop floor at Liverpool. It covers most of the middle pages (4 and 5), with a sidebar giving brief details of NVQ developments on other sites. I selected this piece for discussion because it presented a contrast with the Cobbe article in two respects: its concentration upon a particular department and its narrative style, as against the openly "editorial", exhortatory style of the other article.

Five of the articles were not specific to any site, and a further two applied to several sites. Of the remaining nine, five were specific to Edge Lane (Liverpool), three to Beeston and one to Poole. No item dealt exclusively or mainly with

Coventry, despite the company's headquarters being there. The Poole item was that about an employee's proposed circumnavigation, and two of the three Beeston articles were among the three items about young people, and not directly concerned with the company and its business. The third Beeston article was about an employee's leaving the site on promotion to a senior position in Australia. By contrast, all but one of the articles referring to Edge Lane dealt with the company and its business. Mention, or failure to mention, a site in company publications had often been a matter of concern among employees. In 1993, for example, the former Telecommunications Systems Group (TSG) business division, headquartered in Liverpool, gave prominence in its internal newspaper to a visit from the Minister of State in the Department of Trade and Industry and an initiative which guaranteed "jobs on Merseyside". This was bitterly resented in Coventry, where two departments employing about 150 people were in the process of closure because their work was being concentrated into the Liverpool plant.

4.5 The articles

The articles to be examined appear in the Spring 1996 edition of *GPT Challenge*, which is described as "A GPT employee development publication".

A. Article by Tony Cobbe, Managing Director of GPT Ltd

Keeping ahead of the game ...
It all depends on skill factor

This magazine is well named.

The development and creative application of people's skills is the key to success in business today and therefore developing our people is our greatest challenge.

In a competitive environment, to beat the best you have to be the best. This means having competent, experienced, flexible, motivated employees in every job in every business.

Training and development plays a vital role in this and I am proud of our track record and successes in the past. However, we cannot be complacent. That is why I am committed to achieving Investors in People (IIP) status in all businesses.

IIP helps to ensure that we have the necessary processes in place to effectively manage and develop our people.

It also ensures that we focus our training and development effort on supporting the goals of the business. This is vital, particularly in times of rapid change. The faster change occurs, the more difficult it is to keep skills up to date. Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?

We can't leave it solely to the training departments.

Every one of us has a responsibility for keeping our skills and knowledge current, or better still, ahead of the game.

To do this we must get out of the mindset that 'development' equals 'training course'. This severely limits the learning opportunities to just a few days a year. We must learn how to learn on the job. To make every day an opportunity to learn, develop and improve.

There are many ways of doing this. For example, by reviewing successes and failures, effective delegation, project work, secondments, increased responsibility and good career planning and management.

Far too many of us seem to find the last item a chore. A recent analysis of 4,000 appraisals across GPT showed that only about 20% of the sections on career goals and objectives were properly completed. This is unacceptable.

Continues on p 2 of original

Building on the skill factor

Planning your career properly builds skills, knowledge, experience and flexibility, enabling you to enhance your contribution both now and in the future.

As a business, we must support this process by encouraging more cross-functional and cross-business job moves. Such moves not only significantly develop the individual, they also help to break down barriers between functions and businesses. This increases our collective capability and effectiveness and often improves the ease of doing business for our customers.

The only thing that is certain about the future is that it will not be like the past. As GPT moves into new areas, with for example more emphasis on software development and exports, we need to draw heavily on the skills of our people. Your challenge is to reach your full potential. GPT's challenge is to make maximum use of that potential.

A1. Content

The article's purpose is to exhort employees to improve their skills for the mutual benefit of the employee and the company. This makes the immediate assumption that the company and its employees do in fact have shared interests. The concept of "planning your career" is assumed to apply to all employees, and indeed the middle pages are largely given over to an article about National Vocational Qualifications for semi-skilled workers in the Liverpool plant (discussed below). The validity of applying the concept of a career to such workers, with very limited opportunities for advancement, is not immediately obvious.

Perhaps the nearest that Mr Cobbe's article comes to openly acknowledging a conflict of interest lies in the question asked in the last sentence of paragraph 6 "Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?" and the reply which follows in the following paragraphs, and especially paragraph 9. Mr Cobbe says, "To do this we must get out of the mindset that 'development' equals 'training course'." The lack of appropriate training had for several years been a major complaint of the trade unions in the company, especially when the firm seemed to prefer the recruitment of new staff rather than to retrain potentially redundant employees. Effectively, Mr Cobbe is seeking to steer employees away from demands for formal training into less costly alternatives which can be carried out on the job.

A2. Non-linguistic features

The article makes little use of non-linguistic features. Headlines are provided at the start of the article and at its continuation on page 2. The first sentence, claiming that "This magazine is well named." is printed in bold, with the capital T in larger type and spread over the first two lines. The text is accompanied by a portrait of Tony Cobbe, and a byline indicating that he is the company's managing director. While a photograph of this type is to be expected, it is difficult to know what the publication hopes to achieve by its use. Mr Cobbe has made many decisions during his career in the company which have been unpopular with his subordinates, and the photograph would not necessarily evoke pleasant memories in all who saw it. The text is otherwise unbroken, but is spread over two pages by the use on page 1 of a photograph of a yacht, serving as

a tag to the story about an employee's proposed round-the-world race and another tag to a story on the back page.

A3. Vocabulary

The vocabulary of the article draws heavily upon a "business" lexicon. Perhaps surprisingly, Mr Cobbe nowhere uses the technical terminology of telecommunications, not even referring to any of the company's products by name. Rather, he uses general commercial terminology, including some "buzzwords" which in their original meaning (e.g. 'challenge') have no necessary connection with the world of business:

> The *development* and *creative application* of people's *skills* is the key to *success* in *business* today and therefore *developing* our people is our greatest *challenge*.
> In a *competitive environment*, to *beat the best you have to be the best....*
> *competent, experienced, flexible motivated employees ....job ... business.*
> *Training and development .... track record ... successes...*
> *... Investors in People (IIP) status ... businesses.*

This lexicon is used liberally throughout the article. To some extent, homespun truisms have become a part of this lexicon. In addition to his previously cited conviction that "to beat the best you have to be the best", Mr Cobbe later adds, "The only thing that is certain about the future is that it will not be like the past." There appears to be a desire to appeal to what is "obvious" or "common sense" in this aspect of the business lexicon.

An interesting feature of the lexicon used by Mr Cobbe is the terminology he uses to refer to his subordinates. In the main, he uses pronouns, discussed in the next section. Only three nouns are used to refer to GPT employees: 'the individual', 'employees', and 'people'. The last is used four times, three of them in the form 'our people'. There appears to be a conscious attempt to avoid as far as possible the language of subordination. This is probably intended, with the use of

the first person plural discussed in the next section, to engender an attitude that employees are part of a common endeavour with management.

A4. Pronouns

The article's use of first and second person pronouns is interesting. Mr Cobbe twice refers to himself in the first person. Both uses occur in the fourth paragraph, where he says

> ... I am proud of our track record and successes in the past. However, we cannot be complacent. That is why I am committed to achieving Investors in People (IIP) status in all businesses.

Mr Cobbe seems to intend the first use of "I" to be a "pat on the back" for employees, and the second to emphasize his personal commitment to achieving IIP status, perhaps in the face of some cynicism from employees. More generally, the use of the first person is a marker of direct speech, and may have overtones of sincerity and immediacy. Whether this is so would perhaps depend upon readers' assessment of Mr Cobbe's managerial career as it had affected them.

There are five uses of 'you' or 'your' in the article, concentrated in paragraphs 3, 12 and 14. In paragraph 3, "to beat the best you have to be the best" clearly uses 'you' in its indeterminate use as an alternative to 'one'. Paragraph 12 consists of a single sentence:

> Planning your career properly builds skills, knowledge, experience and flexibility, enabling you to enhance your contribution both now and in the future.

Paragraph 14 concludes:

> Your challenge is to reach your full potential. GPT's challenge is to make maximum use of that potential.

In these cases, 'you' is the individual employee, made responsible for his or her fate.

By far the most heavily used pronoun is 'we'/'us'/'our'. This is used eighteen times in the article, appearing in ten of the fourteen paragraphs. The four exceptions are paragraph 1, which consists of the single sentence "This magazine is well named." and paragraphs 3, 10 and 12. Two of these, 3 and 12, were among those which had used 'you', and paragraph 10 gives example of what "we must learn" according to the preceding paragraph.

Of the eighteen usages, eleven appear reasonably obviously to refer to the company, including the first three occurrences:

> ... developing *our* people is *our* greatest challenge. (para. 2)
> ... *our* track record and successes ... (para. 4)

However, this second example is followed in the next sentence by one of the two usages where it is not immediately obvious whether 'we' means the company or its employees:

> However, *we* cannot be complacent. (para. 4)

Two paragraphs later, a usage obviously referring to the company is followed by one referring equally obviously to employees, where 'we' and 'our' could easily be replaced by 'you' and 'your' - what I have termed the disguised second person:

> It also ensures that *we* focus *our* training and development effort on supporting the goals of the business..... Whose responsibility is it to keep *our* skills current? (para. 6)

The next paragraph returns briefly to ambiguous usage:

> *We* can't leave it to the training departments. (para. 7)

This is followed by a further four occurrences in which 'we' are the employees in paragraphs 8 to 11, stressing actions which 'we' need to take, with paragraphs 13 and 14 returning once more to using the pronoun to refer unambiguously to the company. Thus the article "frames" a section in which the disguised second

person plural refers to employees with introductory and final sections in which 'we' refers to the company. In three of the seven cases in which the possessive 'our' is used in reference to the company, it appears in the expression 'our people'. (See also section A6, where I shall suggest that transitivity suggests that the ambiguous uses are more likely to be examples of the disguised second person.)

The use of the first person plural is ideologically significant in many areas. (Fairclough 1989, Fowler 1991) It is normally used to persuade the reader or listener that she or he is part of a collective, sharing common interests, which may be the nation, "all right-thinking people", or in this case the company. The terminology of traditional grammar disguises the fact that it is not the "plural of the first person singular", except perhaps in choral speech - and even then it is perhaps doubtful whether the average attender at Evensong really thinks he is a "most miserable offender". The language of politics abounds in examples of usage where the first person plural actually excludes the speaker - the disguised second person. In this article, Mr Cobbe appears similarly to be using the first person while excluding himself in his exhortations that "we must get rid of the mindset that 'development' equals 'training course'" or that "we must learn how to learn on the job". The article's use of the first person plural seems to be designed to place obligations on workers, while at the same time maintaining a position that 'we' are all in it together, reinforced by the triple reference to employees as "our people". The transitivity of the article, discussed below, perhaps reinforces this hypothesis.

A5. Syntactic transformations and the verb

The article makes considerable use of nominalization, with nouns or nominal groups used to describe processes. (As noted in the next section on transitivity, Mr Cobbe makes heavy use of nominalizations as the subject of clauses.) For example, paragraph 2 opens with a reference to:

> The development and creative application of people's skills....

This may be expanded to two sentences:

> Someone develops skills. Someone creatively applies them.

This raises the question, unaddressed by the nominalization, of whether "someone" is the same person or organization in both sentences. It is at least possible to understand the underlying meaning as:

> An employee develops skills. The company creatively applies them (and gains profit from them).

The same paragraph sees this "development and creative application" as "the key to success in business today". The noun 'success' can similarly be expanded as:

> Someone succeeds.

Again, the nominalization takes the concept of success for granted and does not ask whether it is the individual or the company who succeeds, and profits thereby.

A nominalization with particular significance is found in the final paragraph:

> As GPT moves into new areas, with for example *more emphasis on software development and exports*, we need to draw heavily on the skills of our people.

Here, an important and controversial change in the company, and indeed in the telecommunications sector generally, is placed in an "example" where nominalization requires no verb. This change of emphasis has been the cause of many thousands of redundancies in the company. The structure avoids any reference to human agency in the decision to change emphasis or the results of the change.

The article in general seems to avoid placing significant meaning in the syntactical main verb. There are forty finite verbs in the article. Of these, fifteen are parts of 'to be': 'is' (11 occurrences); 'am' (2); 'are' (1); and, 'will not be' (1). The other verbs used are:

have to (be the best)
means
plays (a role)
cannot; can't (2 occurrences)
help(s) (to ensure....; to break down barriers - 2 occurrences)
ensures
focus
occurs
has; have (2 occurrences)
must (3 occurrences)
limits
seem (to find ... a chore)
showed
builds (skills....)
develop
increases
improves
moves (into new areas - metaphorically)
need (to draw on skills)
equals
were ... completed

These verbs are either modal ('have to', 'must', 'cannot'), auxiliary, or used in reference to rather vague processes. The article also contains thirty-eight non-finite verbs, such as 'developing'; 'to beat'; 'training'; 'committed'; 'achieving'. While these verbs seem largely to refer to mental processes, they do carry rather more of the semantic content than the finite verbs. In some cases, the main semantic content can be embedded at a very deep level of syntactic subordination, as for example paragraph 5:

IIP helps
to ensure
that we have the necessary processes in place
to effectively manage and develop our people.

This may perhaps play a mystifying role, disguising the agency of this management and development.

A6. Transitivity

The article contains only thirteen examples where a human agent is the syntactic subject of a finite verb. Mr Cobbe twice refers to himself in para. 5 :

> ... I am proud of our track record and successes in the past .
> ... I am committed to achieving Investors in People (IIP) status in all businesses.

In these cases he is attributing to himself a state - pride and a previous commitment, the result of an earlier mental process.

'You' only appears once as the subject of a finite verb - "you have to be the best" - and here it is the indeterminate use of 'you' as the equivalent of 'one' or 'people'. However, later in the article 'you', meaning the individual employee, appears as the subject of the infinitive in "to enhance your contribution".

'We', or an equivalent such as 'each one of us' and 'far too many of us', appears ten times. Four references are to the company:

> IIP helps to ensure that we have the necessary processes in place....
> It also ensures that we focus our training and development effort....
> As a business, we must support this process....
> ... we need to draw heavily on the skills of our people...

In each case these verbs refer to rather vague and non-specific actions or processes, or general obligations to undertake them.

A further four references are to employees, including the two terms equivalent to 'we':

> Each one of us has a responsibility for keeping our skills and knowledge current.

> We must get out of the mindset that 'development' equals 'training course'.
> We must learn how to learn on the job.
> Far too many of us seem to find the last item a chore.

In each case, the modality indicates that 'we', the employees, have an obligation to adopt a specific, desirable form of behaviour, or to refrain from undesirable behaviour. The much greater specificity of these obligations, compared with those imposed on 'us', the company, is noteworthy. The same is true of the two ambiguous usages, where it is not immediately apparent whether 'we' are the company or its employees:

> However, we cannot be complacent.
> We can't leave it solely to the training departments.

This may perhaps indicate that these apparently ambiguous references apply in fact to employees, rather than the company. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that both occurrences are in negative sentences. As Fairclough has pointed out (1989: p 188) a negative sentence is often a disguised acknowledgment of an opposed view, implying in this case that some employees feel that 'we' (the disguised second person, here) can be complacent and leave it to the training departments.

Elsewhere, the syntactic subject of clauses is not a human agent. In the opening sentence of the article it is an object "This magazine". Elsewhere, it is a nominalized process such as the "development and creative application of people's skills", "developing our people", "training and development", "a recent analysis", "your challenge", "GPT's challenge". One sentence has existential 'There are...', and two sentences are of the type which incurs the wrath of traditional grammarians because they lack a finite verb and subject. Empty 'it' is the subject of the only question in the article:

> Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?

Five uses of 'this' and one of 'that' as the syntactic subject refer back to the situation described in the previous sentence. Thus, a 'force' in Fowler's terminology is the syntactic subject of most clauses in the article.

The patient role is almost entirely absent from the article. There are only four unequivocal examples of syntactic direct objects which are human and undergo the effect of a verb, or five, if "to beat the best" is understood to refer to people rather than institutions. The four unequivocal occurrences are:

> developing *our people* (para. 2)
> to effectively manage and develop *our people* (para. 5)
> enabling *you* (para. 12)
> develop *the individual* (para. 13)

It is noteworthy that the verbs, including the triple use of 'develop', have a positive, if rather imprecise, meaning, and that in each case the patient role is taken by employees, individually or collectively. In only one case, the last, is the verb indicative, and even then it is in the 'not only' half of a 'not only... but' structure.

The overall effect is that human agency is largely removed from the article, with the significant exception of 'we', the workers, upon whom various obligations for improvement are imposed.

A7. Modality

With the exception of the question cited in the previous paragraph, the article consists of declarative sentences, reinforced with modal elements of obligation. The question - one of only three in the entire eight-page magazine - is clearly rhetorical, and is in fact immediately answered by six paragraphs which effectively say "It's your responsibility."

The use of declarative sentences in itself makes a claim for veracity. Thus, Mr Cobbe begins:

> This magazine is well named.
> The development and creative application of people's skills is the key to success in business today and therefore developing our people is our greatest challenge.

These propositions are stated as fact, although they are in fact opinions with which not all readers would necessarily agree.

The article is also rich in explicit indications of modality. There are seven uses of modal verbs: 'have to'; 'cannot/can't' (2 uses); 'need'; 'must' (3). The two uses of 'cannot/can't' occur in the two sentences in which 'we' is used ambiguously, although I have suggested that the more likely interpretation is that 'we' refers to workers. Two of the three uses of 'must' occur with 'we, the workers' as subject.

Even more prominent are the many instances of words or structures indicating a modality of obligation, for example:

> .... our greatest challenge; Your challenge ...; GPT's challenge ...;
> ... a vital role ...; This is vital;
> ... I am committed ...;
> Every one of us has a responsibility....;
> This is unacceptable;
> ... properly ...

Thus the article strongly urges employees to feel an obligation to adopt forms of behaviour which are desired by the company.

A8. General conclusions

The article appears to be an example of strategic discourse (Fairclough 1989), or in Connell's terminology (1994) hegemonic communication, making use of several linguistic structures to produce patterns of behaviour and attitudes which

the company regards as desirable. Prominent among these are the use of the first person plural to refer both to the company as an institution and to employees, encouraging workers to see the company as 'us', and a modality of obligation expressed both in modal verbs and in other linguistic structures.

The article also disguises inherent conflict in at least two areas. It seeks directly to address the "problem" (from the author's point of view) of employees equating "development" with "training course", but ignores the conflict and dissatisfaction which often underlay this attitude and which had often been the subject of representations by trade unions, namely the company's perceived unwillingness to invest in training, both in direct investment in the provision of courses and in managers being prepared to release subordinates for training. The emphasis on training on the job in Mr Cobbe's article could thus be seen as a defence of an unsatisfactory situation.

The second area of conflict, linguistically distanced from contradiction by its place in a verbless phrase, was the move towards software and the consequent dismissal of many workers. These consequences go unremarked in the article.

B. Article about NVQs in Edge Lane, Liverpool

NVQs are a success story

Spreading the word...

Following a hugely successful pilot scheme to bring nationally recognised qualifications to PNG's assembly area, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are spreading further into manufacturing.

What is particularly satisfying is that the scheme is being driven by the employees themselves, in conjunction with St. Helen's College.

After the pilot in which all 12 volunteers achieved level 2 qualifications in PCB Assembly and Repair, the workforce decided to expand the scheme further in order to:

- Increase the number of employees formally qualified

- Offer the opportunity to achieve higher qualifications
- Develop the capability to run the assessment process themselves

Challenge talked to Sharon Stanton, Sue Bell, Kathy Tierney and Jack Hewitt of the manufacturing unit at Edge Lane.

The concept of NVQs was first introduced as an integral part of Investors in People (IIP). After the Tandem group (on which management and trade unions are represented) gave their support to their introduction, St. Helen's College was invited in to give further information.

"There was some initial suspicion but these concerns proved to be unfounded. At the end of the day we had nothing to lose," said Jack.

So successful was the initial phase that more employees wanted to join in. A further 49 achieved success. Some never believed they could get a nationally recognised qualification.

"They are delighted with what they have achieved and are looking to do more," said Sue.

As more achieve the level 1 qualification, others have the opportunity to move up to levels 2 and 3 where they have to broaden their skills and demonstrate competence in areas not normally required of them in their day-to-day job.

"Trying for more advanced qualifications gives us the opportunity for further training," said Jack.

To do this, they are taken off the job at a convenient time to train and be assessed in the new skill areas. There is no pressure, people can go at their own speed and the results have been amazing.

"I hadn't soldered for 20 years," said Kathy, "and I was amazed I could still do it." This has led to her doing other types of work to add interest and variety to her job. "I even got the opportunity to do some overtime soldering."

The story doesn't end there. It was later decided to take the responsibility for the assessment process in-house.

"Management have been very supportive," said Sharon, "and when it was suggested we could volunteer to become internal assessors, I welcomed the chance." So did 28 others! To become an assessor they all had two afternoons of training by the college and were then themselves assessed. "The assessment process is very comfortable and fits well into my job as an inspector. There is a lot of paperwork for the assessors to do and this is new to me, but I'm learning how to deal with it. This in itself is a new skill and may be useful in the future."

Jimmy Grimes the production Manager is delighted with the achievements of those involved.

"Having these qualifications means that the quality of our work and our people has been tested against national standards. I am proud of the way everyone has supported this initiative and made it work. In the future we hope all 270 employees in the manufacturing area will have the opportunity to undertake an NVQ."

"I would recommend any group of people to consider NVQs," said Sue. "After all in this day and age you have to move with the times and this is definitely the way forward."

N.B. I have added the inverted commas closing the penultimate paragraph. The sense seemed to require this, since it appears obvious that the remarks were made by Mr Grimes, rather than by Sue.

B1. Content

The article describes the introduction and development of National Vocational Qualifications in a shopfloor area in the Edge Lane plant. It is based upon interviews with four shopfloor workers and a relatively junior manager. In fact, direct speech attributed to employees accounts for a little more than 40% of the article's total length. It forms part of a double-page spread in the centre of the magazine. The closing words attributed to Sue appear again in large print, with white letters on a blue ground, in the middle of the article. On the left side of page 4 is an accompanying article giving synopses of progress on NVQs in various sites.

National Vocational Qualifications are intended to give formal recognition to skills gained in employment. On the face of it, they would seem to be a laudable attempt to give formal recognition to such skills and to make them more readily transferable between employers by giving the employee a piece of paper which says that he or she has these skills. However, despite the enthusiasm shown by the workers in this article, NVQs have not proved so popular as the government had hoped. The *Observer* (10 November 1996) claimed that by that year only two

per cent of workers had gained NVQs. The reasons for this may perhaps include traditional male working-class doubt about the usefulness of qualifications (Willis 1977) and doubt about whether they have any value in teaching new skills rather than recognising existing ones. The latter interpretation is in fact encouraged by the headline to the sidebar accompanying this article: "NVQs - they recognise the skills you hold". The article's exaggerated enthusiasm about so straightforward a semi-skilled process as soldering may perhaps incline the reader to think that they teach very little new knowledge to the worker, and that they are not in this case playing a role in re-skilling the workforce.

The article appears in some respects to be less accessible to the "outsider" than the Cobbe article. In two important respects, its accurate decoding requires knowledge which may only be available to a limited number of employees in Liverpool.

First, the article's heavy reliance upon quotations from "ordinary" employees paradoxically creates problems for interpretation which do not exist in the case of the Cobbe article. Mr Cobbe's authority to pronounce about the welfare of the company and what is needed to ensure its future depends entirely upon his position as managing director - something known to all employees. Again, his known position as managing director would indicate even to a reader with no knowledge of the company that the opinions expressed in the article are those of senior management. On the other hand, only a relatively small circle of employees in Liverpool will be able to assess the "authority" - in terms of skills, attitude towards management, and relationship with colleagues - with which these employees can speak. If the workers were held in low esteem by their colleagues, this could vitiate the immediacy and authority which direct speech seeks to achieve, while that authority would be enhanced if they were highly regarded by other workers.

Secondly, the article is less comprehensible to employees who are not familiar with the work of the department. The difficulty does not lie in the technical content of the article, which refers to three processes (PCB assembly and repair, soldering, and quality inspection) that would be understood by almost every employee of the company, but rather in the "custom and practice" of the department and its internal structures, which are not apparent on the surface of the article. The reader is asked to accept, for example, that "success" was achieved in a department where he or she has no knowledge to judge what "success" might be. Likewise, the reader is not told what are the "suspicions" originally entertained by some workers, and therefore cannot assess Jack's judgment that they were "unfounded".

Two features of the content are potentially controversial for the intended employee readership. One is the absence of any mention of financial rewards for workers who achieved NVQs, other than Kathy's opportunity to do overtime soldering. The other lies in its unequivocal description of the department as "PNG's assembly area". The Liverpool department was the surviving assembly area of the former Telecommunications Systems Group (TSG), the corresponding Coventry area having been closed in 1993. However, assembly areas which had belonged to the former Network Systems Group (NSG) also existed within PNG, on the Coventry and Beeston sites. Historically, mention of particular sites in company publications had been a matter of some sensitivity. Referring to an earlier company publication, and to Mr Cobbe's former role as managing director of TSG, a union leaflet at Coventry had remarked:

> On the front cover, there's Tony Cobbe, also beaming happily, in the company of the Employment Secretary, who happens to be M.P. for Wirral West, and the Chair of the Merseyside TEC. The article talks about GPT's "commitment to Employment on Merseyside". This article will give particular pleasure to those employees who have seen Mr

> Cobbe's commitment manifesting itself in sackings in Coventry. (*Staff Bulletin* 83, published by Coventry unions, 13 September 1993)

B2. Non-linguistic features

The article is headlined, as shown above. The text is accompanied by the reversed colour block, mentioned above, repeating the closing words attributed to Sue, and by two photographs. Both photographs show people working. They are not captioned, but implicitly show people who actually work in the department engaged in real tasks. Alternative interpretations - such as that the pictures are posed, or that the persons do not work in the department - would only be available to the limited group of employees who know the department and its employees. Again, the pictures say nothing to those who are unfamiliar with the department's work about whether the workers are gaining new skills. Paragraph 3 of the text uses bullet points to list the purposes of the expansion of the NVQ scheme. The text is otherwise unbroken by subheadings, and is spread over four columns on the centre pages.

B3. Vocabulary

The article shares with the Cobbe article a substantial use of a general business lexicon, especially around concepts of 'skill', 'achievement' and 'assessment'. The tendency to use "common-sense" truisms as part of this lexicon is found again in this article, occurring in parts of the test attributed to workers:

> At the end of the day we had nothing to lose. (Jack)
> After all in this day and age you have to move with the times and this is definitely the way forward. (Sue, also repeated, except for the first two words, in larger print and reversed colours in a block placed in the centre of the article.)

Unlike the Cobbe article this piece makes use, albeit limited, of technical vocabulary relating to work processes and of terminology specific to the company. The report refers to PCB (printed circuit board) assembly and repair and to soldering. The reader is expected to understand the abbreviation PNG,

which is probably reasonable, since Public Networks Group is by a wide margin the company's largest division. The Tandem group, a Liverpool phenomenon, is rather cursorily glossed by the bracketed words:

> (on which management and trade unions are represented)

There may perhaps be a tacit acknowledgment of potential conflict here, in that the author feels a need to refer to the agreement of the unions.

Two lexical features are particularly noteworthy in this article. One is the heavy emphasis on the concept of 'qualification'. The word 'qualification(s)' itself appears eight times, with two appearances of 'NVQ' and one of 'qualified'. Stress is laid on the novelty and importance of externally validated qualifications:

> Following a hugely successful pilot scheme to bring nationally recognised qualifications to PNG's assembly area....
> Some never believed they could get a nationally recognised qualification.
> Having these qualifications means that the quality of our work and our people has been tested against national standards.

The effect is perhaps to place emphasis on the advantage of having qualifications *per se*, in the absence of evidence in the article that the possession of an NVQ brings any financial advantage.

The second feature is what I shall call a lexicon of pleasant surprise, which appears to be the most obvious linguistic device used to influence the opinion of the reader in this article. The pilot scheme was "hugely successful". Employees' disbelief that they could get a nationally recognised qualification was overcome, and they were "delighted" with their achievements, as was their manager, Mr Grimes. Kathy is "amazed" at her ability to resume soldering after twenty years, and "even" to have the opportunity to do soldering during overtime. Results of training are also "amazing". This lexicon is not confined to quotations from employees, where the pleasant surprise could be accepted as resulting from

enhanced self-esteem when people who have left school with minimal academic qualifications obtain formal recognition of their skills. The author of the article also finds results "amazing" (para. 12), and feels that the decision of 28 of Sharon's colleagues to volunteer as assessors (para. 14) is sufficiently surprising to warrant an exclamation mark. This corporate surprise is not so easily accounted for, since the initiative was presumably carefully costed and its likelihood of success assessed before the decision was made to invest in it.

B4. Pronouns

In this article, the use of third person pronouns and the first person singular is unremarkable, with no ambiguities of usage. A possible exception is Mr Grimes' assertion that "everyone" supported the NVQ initiative. This may be literally true, but this pronoun is frequently used to give an impression of consensus which may not necessarily be based in fact.

As might be expected in an article of this type, all first-person pronouns appear in speech attributed to persons who were interviewed. The use of 'I' in these segments of direct speech may lend a sense of immediacy and, perhaps, authority to the article. The article reports the use of 'we/us/our' by two of the shopfloor workers, Jack and Sharon. In each case, the meaning is straightforward inclusive 'we' - "my colleagues and I". Sue is reported using impersonal 'you' in "you have to move with the times".

Only in the speech attributed to the manager, Mr Grimes, is there any doubt about who 'we' are:

> Having these qualifications means that the quality of *our* work and *our* people has been tested against national standards. ... In the future *we* hope all 270 employees in the manufacturing area will have the opportunity to undertake an NVQ.

In "our work", Mr Grimes could conceivably be using inclusive 'we' - "my subordinates and I" - but this is rendered unlikely by the following "our people". Again, the use of "all 270 employees" following "we" seems to mean that 'we' are a group not including employees. Mr Grimes would appear to have in mind the company or some sub-set of its management, and to be using exclusive 'we'.

B5. Syntactic transformation and the verb

Nominalization and displacement of semantic meaning from the main verb are not so prominent in this article as in Mr Cobbe's piece. This may well reflect the fact that this is a report of events rather than an overtly "editorial" piece.

Nominalization is limited. Generally, nominalizations such as "achievement" are not used in a mystificatory way, because they are attributed explicitly to human agents. A notable exception is the use of "suspicion" attributed to Jack:

> There was some initial suspicion but these concerns proved to be unfounded.

The nominalization could be expanded:

> Someone suspected something.

The nominalization leaves out details of the nature of the suspicions and the number of people who entertained them. The use of the plural "concerns" may imply that workers in the department suspected several undesirable consequences. This raises the question of why the article chooses not to say what the suspicions were, when it might be thought that a direct denial that the scheme had an adverse effect on earnings or conditions might be more effective.

The article shares with the Cobbe piece a tendency for its finite verbs to describe states or processes. Indeed, the only verb referring to a physical action is "solder". There are 64 finite verbs, of which sixteen are parts of 'to be' (excluding

auxiliary uses in passives or progressives). As might perhaps be expected in an article in which a little over 40% of the text is direct speech, it does not contain so high a proportion of non-finite verbs as the Cobbe article - 33 non-finite to 64 finite verbs, as against the 38 non-finite to 40 finite in the other article.

The piece makes considerable use of the passive transformation. The passive can be used in a mystificatory way (Fowler 1991), especially when the agent is omitted, thus hiding from the reader the responsibility for the event being described. There are nine passive transformations in the article, of which only one has an agent mentioned:

> What is particularly satisfying is that the scheme is being driven by the employees themselves, in conjunction with St. Helen's College. (para. 2)

It is perhaps questionable whether this is a genuine passive, since it can be transformed back to:

> ... the employees themselves are driving the scheme...

This does not seem a natural construction, since it is unlikely that 'drive' would be used in this way in the active voice. It may be that we have here a new phrasal verb 'to be driven' which coincides in form with the passive of 'drive', or at least that 'drive' has acquired a new meaning as a defective verb used only in the passive. It could perhaps be argued that the use of an agent - a rare occurrence - draws particular attention to the role of the workers and seeks to attribute to them responsibility for the scheme.

In the other eight uses of the passive, the agent is not mentioned:

> The concept of NVQs *was first introduced.* (para. 5)
> ... St. Helen's College *was invited* in... (para. 5)
> ... they *are taken* off the job .... to *be assessed* (para. 11)
> It *was* later *decided* .... (para. 13)
> ... it *was suggested* ... (para. 14)
> ... they ... *were* then themselves *assessed* ... (para. 14)

> ... the quality of our work and our people *has been tested...* (para. 16)

In only three cases ("taken off the job" and the two occurrences of "assessed") is the syntactic subject a human being. Other subjects are an institution (the college), an abstraction ("concept"; "quality"), and impersonal 'it' (2 occurrences). The result is considerable mystification. A person or persons unknown introduced the concept of NVQs, invited an FE college to run courses, subsequently decided that the assessment process should be taken in-house, suggested that Sharon and her colleagues could become internal assessors, and finally tested the quality of "our work and our people".

B6. Transitivity

The most prominent feature of the transitivity of this article, especially in the light of the high proportion of direct speech which it contains, is the large number of non-human syntactical subjects. There are four cases where an institution (*Challenge* , the Tandem group, the college, management) is the syntactic subject, and a further twenty where abstractions or impersonal forces such as 'it', indefinite 'what' or 'there is' are used. As noted in the preceding section on the passive transformation, human agency is effectively removed from the decision-making process around the introduction and development of NVQs, except for the participation of the workforce.

B7. Modality

The article is notable for its frequent use of an explicit modality of desirability. Reference has already been made to the lexicon of pleasant surprise, which contributes towards this modality. Throughout the article, workers "welcome" or are "delighted" with "opportunities". The pilot scheme is "hugely successful", and it is "particularly satisfying" that the scheme is being driven by workers.

One of the two specific indicators of the modality of truth occurs in the words attributed to Jack:

> There was some initial suspicion but these concerns proved to be unfounded.

Here the indication is of the falsehood of suspicion about the scheme. The second explicit indicator of this modality lies in Sue's concluding words that NVQs are "definitely the way forward".

The modality of obligation appears twice. Workers proceeding to levels 2 and 3 of NVQ "have to broaden their skills", and Sue ends the article by assuring the reader that "you have to move with the times". As in the Cobbe piece, the obligation is placed upon workers.

B8. General conclusions

The most notable linguistic features of this piece, I suggest, are the lexical features of emphasis on the concept of qualification and "pleasant surprise", the disguising of agency by the passive transformation and the absence of human actors as syntactic subjects, and a prominent modality of desirability. These features disguise possible disagreement about the value of National Vocational Qualifications in two respects: the question of whether they actually add new knowledge, extending workers' repertory of skills, or merely recognize formally skills which workers already have, and whether gaining such qualifications carries any financial benefit for the workers. They also disguise the issue of agency in the introduction of these qualifications, with no reference to management's role or motives in introducing them.

4.6 GPT Coventry focus group

There were eight participants of whom three were women (P, B, M) and five were men (D, S, G, K and N). Five participants (D, S, G, K and P) were technical workers. B and N were clerical workers, although N had previously been a technical worker until his former job had become redundant. M was a manual worker. The proportion of technical workers is broadly the same as that in the Coventry sites, where more than 2000 of the 3000 employees are in technical or managerial grades. This was probably the group with the highest level of general academic qualification, with five graduates among the participants. Six members worked in the larger of the company's two Coventry plants, New Century Park, also known as Stoke. B and M worked in the smaller site, New Horizon Park, better known as Helen Street. With the exception of N, who worked in the company's defence division, all the other participants worked in Public Networks Group. Three members of the group (S, B and M) had previously been

interviewed in their capacity as senior representatives. One participant spoke English as a foreign language, but this did not appear significantly to affect his understanding of issues discussed. All participants in this group had known me as a former colleague. They had agreed to meet me as result of a request from the senior representatives. The meeting was held in the evening and was not connected with any trade union function or other meeting.

4.6.1 Communication in general

After outlining the proposed plan for the meeting, I invited the group initially to comment freely on the company's policy for communication with employees, suggesting team briefings as one possibility on which they might like to comment.

N began by saying, "I think the problem with team briefs is the fact that the briefer is very selective about what he tells you. You don't get an overall picture to be able to put in into context ... anything he says into context with anything else." He added that "you were left somewhat in the air sometimes" because of the omission of information about events elsewhere in the company which would provide context. "And if you ask a question, you get told very often that that's not relevant" (because it does not immediately relate to the business division in which the briefing is being carried out). When I asked why events elsewhere should be considered relevant N replied, "I think it's relevant because very often people know from the team brief ... that people are talking about ... the fact that the headcount's too high for instance and they'd like to know what the state of the rest of the business is for transfers, job prospects or anything else."

D said, "My perception is that team briefs have actually improved a bit recently" with information being given from director level in a "slightly more structured way" than before. The "big problem", however, was that "middle and lower

management who are actually giving the briefs very often don't believe in what they're putting out themselves." I asked why D thought that this was the case. D replied, "Well, because they've got more sense than to believe it."

I asked for concrete examples. D instanced "enthusiasm about Investors in People". P added that she thought "it all depends on who your team leader is. Our team leader at the moment is a lot more sceptical about the company than my previous team leader" who had been "much more company-orientated and did try to put all the positive sides of the company across". She felt that if questions were asked in team briefs and managers didn't know the answer they would try to find out, but that "you often don't get (an answer) until two or three team briefs later, if you get it at all". It was common for managers giving briefs not to know answers. They were "only there to give (the limited information they had) ... rather than participating". She felt that her present team leader was more sympathetic to questions about overtime and similar matters of pay and conditions than his predecessor.

S felt that the "fundamental problem with team briefs is that all the managers have their own objectives ... I mean there is no common objective - what the team brief should be all about. So everybody is trying to interpret it and give their interpretation of what it should be." He felt that the company's defined objective "had not been spread homogeneously". Some managers who did not know the answers to questions responded honestly , but there were others who "cannot be seen as ... that they don't know the answers, and so they will bullshit you basically.... Normally people ask questions when they know the answer, and it is very easy to find out someone who is trying to bullshit you."

N intervened to ask S if he always had the brief from the same person. S responded, "Yes." N continued by saying that in his area the task was rotated

among managers, so that everyone got the experience. N did not think this was a good practice: "There isn't a consistency there." S continued, asking what was the company's objective in holding team briefs; he had never been told, and asked if any other members of the group had been explicitly told why the company used team briefings. P thought the reason was obvious - "to pass information down from the top; the trouble with that is, it's not interactive." While questions could be asked, the lack of immediate answers meant that there was no possibility of conversation. "Two months later", she remarked, "you've forgotten what you asked anyway." (In response to a question from me, P confirmed that two months was by no means an uncommon period to wait for a reply.) Some people "always asked the same question, like when are we going to get the same conditions as Liverpool, for example, and that comes back month after month after month after month."

I asked how often briefings were held, P replying that they were held monthly in her area. This was the norm. M outlined the situation in manual workers' areas. The team brief was "cascaded" from the director responsible for her area, Mr Walsh. (M had access to Mr Walsh's original version, which she thought was "interesting".) Lower level managers added their own local brief to Mr Walsh's, highlighting the parts of Mr Walsh's brief they found interesting but "read(ing) it word for word" and unable to answer questions. Local line managers (foremen) or team leaders (chargehands) tended to highlight the bits they understood, but:

> Nobody's interested, not the slightest little bit, in that team brief, and then she'll add her own team brief, what's gone on in the section, what we're failing at, what our quality's like, and what our output's like... She'll have the good news and she'll have the bollockings, and people are more interested in the bollockings, than they are in what comes from Pat Walsh's team brief. So you see, looking at it from the shop floor's point of view, they're not interested in Pat Walsh's team brief. They're only interested when it comes back to talking about whether the yearly bonus is going to pay out or not, why we didn't make the monthly bonus, why it dropped to two per cent. They're not interested about who got the top job

> in personnel... they're not interested in anything like that. They're only interested in how we're doing, whether we've got workload.... And as for the magazines, people are saying, those magazines, they could spend the money on something that was useful for the majority of the workforce instead of a glossy magazine that costs an arm and a leg.

D added that "really interesting information never comes out in a team brief", but it comes out through the grapevine. N added:

> The one thing it did stop was the trade unions getting at the management who did make the decisions, and being able to press them. Nowadays the information's communicated at a far lower level, and it did weaken the position of the unions' representation to a large extent, and I think that was designed (*noises of assent from other participants*) as part of the communication process.

B added that this was "what it's all about", citing responses to a conditions claim coming back, not in the negotiating process but through a magazine much later. S agreed, saying that the company was bypassing negotiation through the use of magazines, "so everyone now is waiting for the next magazine, instead of demanding from the union when are you going to seek and get the result of the conditions claim". M added that she had been asking since last August - the group met in late March - for the response to the conditions claim.

G said, "One thing that strikes me is the difference between what it says in the glossy magazine and what you get from your manager... because your manager has the same agenda which goes forward unchanged year after year". To his manager it was "news" that "people should move around the company or get a bit of training".

I asked about how Investors in People was proceeding in the company. P said, "It's gone by the by really". (*Noises of assent from other participants.*) N added, "I think all the company's interested in is a little shiny plaque on the wall and a flag flying outside." M said NVQs were now the popular thing with managers. G

added that he believed that higher management "would like people to get higher skills because they've got trouble recruiting people with the right skills, but making that happen in GPT with all its bureaucracy is another matter." D thought that training was now "done in a more organized and systematic way" than it had been in the past, but it was "still pretty haphazard", with people not going on training courses for which they had been nominated. B's experience was very different, with people encouraged or even compelled to go on training courses, with the managing director's permission required to withdraw from a course. M's experience was similar, citing managers who were afraid to withdraw employees from training courses because of the need to justify the withdrawal to the managing director. P said that she had no doubt that training was "a lot better than it used to be", with compulsion in her area being restricted to problems in withdrawing after initially volunteering for a course.

Quality improvement groups had gone out of fashion in most of the company. They seemed largely to have "been replaced by OES" said B. (This is an abbreviation for Organizational Effectiveness Survey.) N reported that in his area there was a quality improvement group, but "it goes under a different name" which he couldn't remember. There were teams set up to look at various aspects of the department's work.

4.6.2 Articles from *GPT Challenge*

I then asked the group to look at the articles, starting with Tony Cobbe's article, asking what he was trying to achieve and whether they felt he succeeded. D said, "I think it's trying to persuade people that GPT will ... wants you to keep training and to maintain your skills, and to develop". S said it reminded him of a push a year or so ago to get everyone to do training in their own time, such as OU or postgraduate degrees:

somehow passing the training that the company has to give you to improve your skill to .. as a personal challenge that if you want to be employed you have to train in your own time, and then when you go home you have to (sharpen) your tools to come back the next day with them ready, and they don't give you time for you to develop. ... And part of the appraisal for your salary was that... and people who were not ... having family commitments or whatever, didn't go to these courses, and didn't tell the company that they were taking courses, they were penalised in their pay increase.

N agreed with S. "Looking at it with a biased eye, I must admit, the company is saying it isn't our responsibility, it's your responsibility to train yourself and keep yourself up to the mark, so that we will employ you."

D thought that the article was:

> as much aimed at managers, to remind managers that their job is to ensure people are doing the training that's needed... because I think again it's this thing that what the actual line managers do is completely different from what the company policy is ... Most line managers are actually not keen to let people go on too many training courses, and I think that's part of what this is about.

M outlined the training process on the shop floor with new recruits beginning with less skilled tasks before being allowed to use surface mounting machinery to insert components in printed circuit boards, but everyone "had to do every element of the job". She attributed to this flexibility the company's willingness to concede more flexible holidays, which "mean that if you go on holiday, I've got to do your job, and maybe even change my shift as well to allow you to have your holiday". Ability or inability to do a variety of jobs also affected appraisals on the shop floor.

G remarked:

> When I read that, I thought what Tony Cobbe's thinking is that they can't get hold of the people with the skills by just buying them in. One way of doing it is, just sack the old people and get new people in. I think if GPT thought they could do that they would, but I think they're saying they've found it doesn't work, they're stuck with the people they've got and wish

> they could change their skills and update them and that's what this (is about)... (*End of sentence unclear, as another participant interrupted G.*)

M intervened to say that with the manual workforce the company had in fact got rid of people through large-scale redundancies, retaining people with more than one skill and recruiting those who could be trained in multiple skills. Members of the group from white collar areas had had a different experience. D instanced a "big recruitment drive" for software engineers which had led to the recruitment of only "a handful" of people after a year. He attributed the company's drive for training to its inability to recruit from outside. Asked why the company found it difficult to recruit software engineers, he said, "They don't pay them for a start." P mentioned the problem of recruiting new graduates, or people with a few years experience outside the company, who could demand salaries higher than the company was prepared to pay to existing, experienced employees. This "really pissed off" people already working in the department.

Regarding training, P remarked:

> I don't know what I think about this actually, because I think that ... I don't know ... they're putting the onus on the individual obviously, they're obviously putting the onus on the individual, yet ... and the problem with that is the individual, because, particularly in software engineering, because they're so busy, it's very hard to put yourself up for a course.

People going on courses fell behind with their normal work or took work home.

S's experience was similar, but D said "Nobody in my area does courses that involve learning at home." B reported people in her area working at home, and staying behind at night without being paid for it.

S drew attention to the removal of demarcation and the introduction of multiskilling, with minimal formal training, in some shop floor areas, with this flexibility not being reflected in an increase in salary: "You have four skills to offer, but you still have only one salary" with the use of redundancy as a threat :

"If you don't learn other jobs you will be out". In the software areas, where the company wanted to recruit specialists, the situation was different. He instanced a case where the company needed to recruit ninety engineers. Of over a hundred applicants, fourteen were called for interview, four were offered jobs, and none accepted.

I intervened to ask about the concept of the career, on which Mr Cobbe's article seemed to rely heavily. There was considerable cynicism about this. The manual worker, M, pointed out that there had never been a career structure of increments in her area. S said, "Well, the career was only to replace the pay structures", referring to the company's abolition of an incremental system for engineers (the 'templates') in favour of a merit-based system. The company was trying to rebuild what S felt it had destroyed. G referred to having read that "the working classes have jobs and the middle classes have careers... but I do have difficulty in coming round to what on earth this concept of the career is". N added:

I don't think people do see a career, they see a job now. (*interruption by several people assenting*) They don't see a future within the company that's employing them; the job's a temporary watering hole.
B: and how long they're likely to stay here..
N: They don't see a career; a career's a progression. They don't see that.
G: Years ago, someone in a nice job as a bank manager, or working in law, they'd start off just, right at the bottom, copying what other people did, and then they'd get the next stage up, and they'd do a more skilful job, and then they'd get the next stage up, and then there's... (*unclear, assenting noises over G*)
D : ... My impression is that even within the engineering sort of side of things, (people who aspired to promotion) are pretty much a minority. I think most people....
B: would just settle for a job next year...
D: Yeah. (*Interruptions*) I mean they're keen to get more money but.... I don't think many people...
P: I think people in our department do like to think that they've got a career, I mean they do like to think there's a career, they really do. They have (unclear) that they're professionals, but really when it comes down to it they're more concerned... they do have a career scale now, they've got these PECS, which are supposedly trainee engineer, engineer, senior engineer and then principal engineer, but nobody looks at themselves

> each year and thinks I want to become a senior engineer or principal engineer, 'cause they know that that jump, it doesn't really exist, you know. It can take nearly ten years for you to jump from one to the other....

She went on to describe how in theory it was now possible to progress without accepting supervisory duties by becoming an "experienced engineer", but described this as "a farce really". People were just interested in their next pay rise and how their pay compared with that of their colleagues.

I now moved on to details of the article, asking first why the group believed there was a photograph of the managing director at the top of the article. Responses included:

> N: "Just so people recognise him when they knock him over."
> B: "It's meant to be friendly, you know, we're all sort of, 'You know who we are', like. That's what I think."
> D: "I think it's a good thing, that we know if you see him coming around you got to look as if you're working."
> B: "You make sure you don't let him sit by you in the canteen." G added that when he joined the company in 1977, the idea of the managing director eating in the same canteen had been "out of this world".

I asked what the group made of Mr Cobbe's use of "us" and "you". I ended the question, "Who is he talking to, who are 'we'?" M replied, "I think he's talking about his fellow directors." S, however, thought that Mr Cobbe was "trying to create a sense of family, a sense of ... co-operative feeling, that we belong to a team, a team pulling together with (unclear) I think that he's trying to give that feeling that he's there at the head, together with us, and basically I see it like that." N 's view was that, "He's trying to say that there's an egalitarian society, which we'd none of us agree with at any rate."

I drew specific attention to the text "We can't leave it solely to the training departments. To do this we must get out of the mindset that development equals training course." While I emphasised the word "We", this was not taken up by

the group members, who concentrated their replies on the question of responsibility for training, seeing Mr Cobbe as trying to pass the buck to individuals. Thus, while not expressly analysing the use of the first person plural, the group seem to have interpreted it in its context as an effective use of the disguised second person. G conceded that there was a need for people to learn on the job by putting into practice what they had learned on training courses. P "half agreed" but said that there were not facilities within the department to train on the job, with a "time is money" attitude and a view that you were "responsible for your job", combined with a need to book all time to specific projects. "With short term targets", she remarked, "comes unwillingness to help train other people." B reported that in her area she was trying to learn things, but that people who could train her "would rather do it for me, 'cause it's easier.... For the last twelve months I've had really good people round me who've all been doing my job because it's easier." (i.e. It was easier for them to do aspects of her work themselves rather than ask her to do it.)

S distinguished between jobs which "you learn through practice" and those where a greater level of formal training was needed. Training on the job was difficult because co-workers capable of training colleagues did not have the time to do so. This was exacerbated by the need to book all work activity to specific codes, for charging purposes, and by more frequent progress meetings, making it more difficult to "recover" work not carried out while training a colleague. He felt that this placed stress on the instructor. B agreed, and added, "It's embarrassing for the person who's trying to learn as well, because you feel you don't want to keep asking people, because, you know, you're taking away from what they think they should be doing."

I asked if the participants felt there were any points where they felt that Mr Cobbe was using a particular form of words to avoid controversy or in order not

to make a bad impression on readers. There was no immediate response, and I prompted with the example of the last sentence's reference to a move towards software. N suggested the interpretation, "We're going to screw you harder to get out of you what we want." S took a similarly cynical view, suggesting that Mr Cobbe meant that he was going to ask for unpaid overtime, and for people to "change your family life to fit the company". D saw no meaning in the sentence, which he described as "a sentence of waffle". B had asked someone in her area to read it; that person had believed that the article as a whole was "waffle". She remarked that people to whom she had shown the articles had said that the item from BT was also "full of waffle, but much nicer". M took up the words "maximum use of their potential" in the context of the shop floor, where she said that recently introduced team leaders, faced with five boxes of fourteen boards, needed a calculator to work out how many boards they'd got, having been promoted over more competent and experienced colleagues.

I prompted again by asking what the move towards software had meant for people on the shop floor. At this direct prompt, M replied that "people on the shop floor feel their jobs are gradually slipping away and that there's become more and more software engineer type, less and less manual jobs." B agreed, saying that there were now very few people in production areas in Helen Street, the lines being very highly automated.

I drew attention to the infrequency of human beings as agents in the piece, and asked why the participants felt that this was the case. G responded by saying that there was a "U-turn" from the earlier mass-production practice of "turning people into machines", referring to the use in his work area of the word "resources" to refer to people. He felt that there was a move away from deskilling (his term). He attributed this change in the company to a move away from the earlier

practice whereby the main customer, BT, had specified exactly what was to be made.

I asked if participants felt that Cobbe was trying to make the reader feel a sense of obligation in the article. Several participants said "yes", elaborating the reply with reference to "putting the onus on the individual" (P) or similar phrases.

I now asked participants to look at the second article from GPT Challenge, about NVQs in the Liverpool plant. I began by asking what was shown in the two pictures accompanying the article. Responses were: "Ladies" (N); "Manual workers" (S). Nobody questioned whether the people shown actually worked in the area about which the article was written.

I asked, "What do you think is the purpose of the article?" B suggested that the company was "very focused" in the direction of getting IIP status and the Queen's Award for Industry. M mentioned the difficulty of finding time to train NVQ assessors in Helen Street because of tight production schedules. Shop floor workers were not prepared to train in their own time. By contrast "Liverpool sailed through it" and had "hundreds of NVQs". N felt that "the essence is in the second paragraph, where the company is absolving itself from what I would consider the company's responsibility" (for training). This was greeted by murmurs of assent from other participants. He asked, "Where's the company involvement except to get the little bit of paper that says, 'We're a good employer'?"

I drew specific attention to the absence of the company as an agent. I asked if participants saw the article presenting NVQs as "sort of happening" without company involvement. M spoke about her difficulty in getting help from management for people training as assessors, instancing people who had to do all

the work at home. N saw different attitudes by different managers as proving the point that there was no corporate responsibility. D saw the article as "trying to sell the idea that the NVQ is a useful qualification to have, that this is a good thing for you, therefore you should have enthusiasm, you should go out of your way to get it... It's a propagandist article." B said that when NVQs began at Coventry, the company had brought in "qualified" assessors from the local technical college, but saw the change to internal assessors (a boast of the article about NVQs in Liverpool) as a cost-cutting exercise. She felt that, by using company employees as assessors, the company could "have all these things for nothing and still have good publicity". M outlined difficulties in obtaining assessors or persuading people to take NVQs. M said that manual workers believed that managers could abuse NVQs, by demanding greater flexibility of workers who had them. There was also cynicism because NVQs did not lead to extra pay. (This would be consistent with the Liverpool article, where the only mention of financial benefit is one woman allowed to do overtime.)

B expressed concern at the way in which the first people to get NVQs became assessors, and were effectively "licensed to give out qualifications". She had initially been enthusiastic about NVQs when they appeared to be an externally moderated qualification, and compared the brief training given to GPT's assessors with a friend who had received three years' training for teaching them. She was unhappy with the idea that becoming an assessor was "something which people did part-time at home". P saw it as a "way of trying to multi-skill people at the same time as trying to feed their career aspirations". She agreed with B that "it doesn't mean anything". M criticised a system whereby people became assessors for jobs which they could not do themselves.

I returned to P's remark about the article "feeding people's career aspirations" and asked how she felt the article did that. She responded that it did so by saying that

"you yourself as an individual can make your own career within GPT" by internal qualifications. S felt that it was seeking to give the idea that you could enter the company as a labourer sweeping the floor and gain promotion to become a director.

I asked the group what they made of the things which workers said in the Liverpool NVQ article. D said "they're all very positive". M had met some of the Liverpool people when they came down to Coventry and said they seemed to be very much "sold" on the idea of NVQs. B said that many people would react positively to gaining NVQs if they have never had qualifications - "the idea is really good, but it's just the way they're going about it." D said that "they all sound very enthusiastic, gushing." The workers appeared to see the qualifications as "the best thing since sliced bread" (B). I then asked specifically if the participants believed what the workers were saying. S compared it with advertising, where the models in lipstick and tight advertisements respectively had the most beautiful lips and legs, feeling that the management had selected the workers with the most favourable attitudes. D thought:

> They probably sat around a table with a couple of tape recorders a bit like this (*laughter*) .. they may have said something along the general lines of some of these phrases but I suspect that the actual word for word quotes were probably written by the people who wrote the article. I don't believe they actually said word for word 'they are delighted with what they have achieved and are looking to do more'.

N agreed with D, but M disagreed, saying that the visitors from Liverpool who had visited Helen Street to speak about NVQs "did speak like that", but she conceded that they may have been "hand-picked". S suggested that Liverpool employees might have a more positive attitude because they were given the necessary time and facilities to do courses. P expressed her doubts saying that "it all sounds very good" but she felt the test would be "where has it got them in five years' time".

I asked if the participants felt they would understand the article better if they worked in Liverpool and perhaps actually knew the people involved. B thought that this would be true. This met with general assent. P felt that the quotes from working people would work with "very naive and innocent people". S then said that the whole thing needed to be taken with a pinch of salt because many people (he suggested as many as 50%) put the magazines into the waste paper basket unread, and that the money could be better spent.

I asked the participants who, according to the article, introduced NVQs in Liverpool. Responses were "I don't know" or "(the workers) themselves, according to this". I went on to ask about "suspicions" - "Who was suspicious, and what do you think they suspected?" M replied that the management "might expect more of you for no more money". Fears about flexibility were also mentioned. I summed up by saying, "You're not told, are you?" and asking if there were any other places where they felt they were not told who was responsible for something, and how they decided who was responsible. D responded, "In most of the article you're not told who's responsible for things." I asked, "How do they avoid telling you?" I was unable to obtain any further explanation.

4.6.3 Control article

Finally I asked participants' views about an item from another company, in this case Mr Earnshaw's letter to BT employees. Responses varied, perhaps depending upon participants' knowledge of BT, which is GPT's main British customer. D commented that it began with congratulations about how well the company was doing, until "about half way down you realise he's talking about sacking a whole load of people." G, who appeared to have some personal knowledge of BT's practices, took the most positive view of this item, pointing to "an enormous difference" between BT's and GPT's ways of dealing with potentially redundant people. He clearly understood the letter to be saying that there would be no compulsory redundancies. Other participants saw the BT letter as "nicer" or "more factual". P took the most hostile view, believing that BT would make compulsory redundancies if it felt it necessary. N saw the letter as "implying that BT has a responsibility" towards employees whose jobs are potentially redundant, in contrast to GPT's line of "making the employee feel that he is responsible for being made redundant". Some participants felt that there was "less bullshit" in the BT letter than in GPT's publications. I asked the purpose of the letter, P responding that it was a "warning". Despite her generally negative response, she drew attention to the use of the words "in response to feedback from a number of you", which she felt would never appear in a GPT publication. I confirmed that G was right in believing there were no compulsory redundancies, and that BT's problem was, if anything, too many volunteers wanting to "jump ship". N responded by saying that this was not surprising, in the light of BT's comparatively very generous terms for people accepting voluntary redundancy. I asked what they thought was the purpose of the letter. It was seen in terms of "canvassing for volunteers" (D). P saw it as "putting you on your guard". I was asked as I was about to close the meeting whether the BT

article was a letter on its own or "buried in a magazine". I confirmed that it was the former.

4.6.4 GPT Coventry focus group: conclusions

In this, the first focus group, some features emerged which were to become commonplaces as the research progressed. Among these were:

- claims that many employees discarded company publications without reading them;
- complaints that team briefings included irrelevant information or failed to include relevant material, because of lack of understanding or division among managers;
- complaints of "one-way" briefings, with tardy or non-existent feedback;
- suspicion of "bullshitting";
- belief that new methods of communication, such as team briefings, constituted attempts to exclude or bypass trade unions.

In this case, the claim that as many as 50% of employees threw their company magazines into the bin without reading them was made by S. While this was not directly confirmed by other participants, neither was it contradicted by other members of a group who felt able confidently to express disagreement with colleagues.

Complaints about the material in team briefings paradoxically took diametrically opposed forms. N complained of his management's omission from the brief of material about other divisions which he would have wished to hear, while M's colleagues were narrowly interested in matters directly affecting their department. This could perhaps reflect the different working environments. N worked in an area where he and many of his colleagues had formerly worked in other divisions and where skills were, broadly speaking, transferable. Thus, they

could be interested in other business areas because of the possibility of a job move. M, by contrast, worked in one of the few surviving shop-floor areas, where job mobility within the company was restricted, and where earnings were heavily affected by a complicated system of annual and monthly bonuses, together amounting to about a third of wages. In this situation, her colleagues were narrowly interested in their department's performance because it immediately affected their pay.

D and P raised issues about team briefings and divisions among management. P approved of her supervisor's independence of mind and scepticism about the company, while D felt that junior managers "had more sense than to believe" the material they were putting out. This perhaps indicates a proletarian orientation (Braverman 1974) among the lower echelons of management, and lends support to the view that management cannot be treated as a homogeneous whole. The interviewees noted that managers did not seem to be agreed among themselves about the purpose of team briefing. Similarly, G's belief that local managers' agenda remained "unchanged year after year", irrespective of what senior management said in glossy magazines, and D's view that *GPT Challenge* was "as much aimed at managers" also indicate that the management did not all take the same position.

P's complaint of tardy responses, with the same questions "coming back month after month after month" met with agreement from her colleagues. It is perhaps significant that this complaint arose specifically around questions to managers about pay and conditions.

Members clearly saw briefing by relatively junior managers as part of a policy of union exclusion, by using these managers, who could not take decisions, as a channel for information, while "stopping the trade unions getting at the

management who did make the decisions". With team briefing, the company was using the *Response* magazine, so that "everyone ... is waiting for the next magazine instead of demanding from the union when are you going to seek and get the results of the conditions claim".

The group was cynical about Investors in People (IIP), seeing it in terms of the company "getting a little shiny plaque on the wall and a flag outside". There were ambivalent views about the company's attitude to training in two broad respects: an appreciation of the value of training for the individual employee combined with suspicion about the company's motives in encouraging training, and a belief that the company wanted a trained workforce but that it was reluctant to invest the necessary time and money to achieve this. A further ambivalence arose around the idea that people had a responsibility for their own career development: some participants, such as P, partially conceded this, while again feeling that the company was not doing all it should to encourage them. These ambiguities became more apparent as the group discussed the articles from *GPT Challenge*.

Tony Cobbe's article was perceived by the participants to be passing responsibility for training from the company to the individual. Linguistically, the participants saw his words "We can't leave it to the training departments" in this context, substituting 'you' for 'we' in their responses, interpreting it as the disguised second person. Underlying the article's encouragement to take control of one's own career, several participants discerned a threat that their promotion prospects or even their job could be at risk if they did not undertake unpaid training outside normal working hours. Some participants saw the emphasis on training as a result of the company's inability to recruit new staff, because it was not prepared to pay them an appropriate salary. On the job training was difficult because more experienced employees could not take time from their own work to

assist junior colleagues. The company was seen as trying to get more skill for the same pay.

The concept of the "career" varied in its attractiveness between members of the group. To some extent, this tallied with the pattern which might have been expected, with the manual worker being explicit about the absence of a career structure in her department. However, it was an experienced graduate engineer (G) who explicitly said, "I do have difficulty in coming round to what on earth this concept of the career is". It was evident from the ensuing conversation that the concept of the career was largely undermined by insecurity. Even P, who said that her colleagues wanted to believe in a career structure, was deeply cynical about whether such a structure existed. There seemed to be an echo in the engineers' contributions to the discussion of a recruitment campaign mounted by MSF's predecessor union, ASTMS, some twenty years previously. In that campaign, a white-collar worker was shown regretting the day he "picked up a pen rather than a shovel". There was, I felt, an ambivalence: the participants would like to feel that they were professional people with a career structure, but the realities of the job meant that they could not so regard themselves. This reaction perhaps supports Anthony's contention (1977) that the middle class is rejecting the work ethic, and may explain it in terms of white-collar workers losing faith in the concept of the career. Their reaction may also tend to support Durkheim's and Braverman's scepticism about the value of education to employees.

Broadly speaking, when this group were asked to comment on specific linguistic features, their response tended to be couched, not in linguistic terms, but in terms of what the specified section of the article meant for practical purposes. Their decoding of language which could have been obfuscatory or mystifying was usually oppositional, so that Mr Cobbe's reference to the move towards software

and exports was glossed in terms of "screwing you harder", and making workers "change (their) family life to fit the company", people on the shopfloor "feeling their jobs are gradually slipping away", or at best as "waffle". The modality of obligation was decoded as "putting the onus on the individual". The avoidance of the language of subordination, which is now so common a feature of management communication with employees, had no effect upon the participants' oppositional view.

When looking at the Liverpool article, participants once again saw it in terms of the company's focus on IIP and the Queen's Award for Industry, and of absolving itself from responsibility for training. The use of company employees as assessors, rather than more fully trained outside assessors, was seen as cheeseparing and academically flawed. The participants' ambivalence towards training manifested itself again, with some recognition that NVQs were a good idea, if properly validated. However, there was cynicism about the company's commitment, in that it appeared to be trying to get NVQs on the cheap by using its own employees as assessors, while there was no mention of financial reward for persons who gained NVQs. There was also concern that the company might place extra work demands on employees with NVQs. The participants were able to see that the article avoided attributing responsibility for the introduction of NVQs, but themselves had no doubt that the company was responsible.

The participants mostly found the "enthusiastic, gushing" language attributed to the Liverpool employees unconvincing. The one partial exception, M, who had met some of the Liverpool employees at Helen Street, when they had in fact spoken like the quoted employees, conceded that the people who came to Coventry might have been "handpicked".

I had expected regionalism to be relevant in this company. When asked directly, the participants said that they felt that they would have a better understanding of the NVQ article if they worked in Liverpool. M referred explicitly to the ease with which assessors had been found in Liverpool compared with Coventry, and the large numbers of people in Liverpool who were gaining NVQs. (Some members of the group hazarded a guess that Liverpool management were providing opportunities to train as an assessor during working hours.) However, the reference to the Liverpool shopfloor area as "PNG's assembly area", which I had expected to be controversial, passed completely without comment. This may have been because the corresponding area in Coventry had until recently been part of a different division and was still producing different products. Consequently, there may have been no perceived threat of closure of the Coventry facility in this terminology. Experience was important in the interpretation of management communication, and in this case it may be that experience had not so far indicated that this was any cause for concern. I shall return again to the concept of regionalism in my concluding remarks on the Liverpool focus group.

Responses to the control article from BT varied somewhat. The largely favourable response may to some extent have arisen from direct knowledge of the situation within BT by some participants, since the company is GPT's largest UK customer. Knowledge that BT has a relatively generous redundancy package, and that the company has not made compulsory redundancies, influenced some responses, with G going so far as to interpret the piece as promising no compulsory redundancies.

It could perhaps be concluded that the group's decoding of their employer's communication depended more heavily upon what Fowler (1991) calls "reference" rather than "sense". The message from the company is decoded in

terms of its associations in the real world, in this case, in connection with the company's pattern of behaviour in relations with its employees. The concept of "member's resources" (Fairclough 1989) is also important. I would suggest that in the case of this focus group members' resources play a double role. As with the other groups discussed below, members' resources - in the form of an interpretative ability based on experience and intertextual reading with other company communications - play a part in ensuring that reference becomes the main element in the decoding of its vocabulary and message. I would further suggest that members' resources also underlie a surprising (and initially disappointing) feature of this group - the difficulty of drawing out from the participants any explicitly linguistic comment. A question specifically about language use in the articles, which in other groups was taken at face value, more usually drew from this group a response which looked behind the language to underlying features of industrial relations and work as experienced in the company, with no further reference to the linguistic feature to which I had drawn attention. I believe that this may arise from a specific feature of the members' resources - their previous acquaintance with me as a trade union official. I would suggest that the participants were looking beyond my surface questions to consider what I meant as a known union activist.

4.7 GPT Liverpool focus group

This focus group meeting was held following a meeting of the branch to which MSF members at GPT's Liverpool plant belong. Initially, eleven people were present, of whom three were former employees of GPT and one was an employee of another company. Only the present GPT employees remained throughout the meeting. Of the seven current employees, most were technical workers, primarily in grades which were not normally recruited from graduates, while one (G) was a manual worker in a grade represented by MSF. Only one of the group (S) was a

woman. D is a senior negotiator of considerable experience. None of the group had previously been interviewed.

4.7.1 Communication in general

I began by inviting general comments. D began, saying that the company had moved away from its traditional response through the unions in favour of the newer method of directly approaching workers. This was seen as union exclusion. The change was first observed in the 'eighties and became more prevalent in the early 1990s. "They've moved away from the trade unions and they've moved now to trying to go to the members or the employees direct. Now, how they're doing that, as you say, you talk about team briefs, quality circles, all those kind of things." Team briefs were being used to "get the message across", but he added:

> Maybe the problem is, the people who put the message across, because it's a cascading type thing with team briefs, the people who are actually hitting the lower levels, by the time it's come down, the message is the same but they are not good at communicating, and the message does not get out the way maybe it should get out, because the trade unions had a traditional method through the negotiators, through their committees, through the membership, and it was portrayed down a lot better than I think that the company, but the company do not now want the unions involved, and do hell and all to try to overcome that problem. So basically, I see the company using team briefs, quality circles, as a method of trying to get away from the traditional trade union method, of going directly to the employees, and vice versa, trying to get the employees to go directly through assessments, appraisals, all those type of things, to use those as the people on a one-to-one type basis. And personally, I don't think it works; I think the traditional methods are far better.

M remarked that the new system didn't work from the employees' point of view:

> When we talk about whether a thing works or not, we've got to analyse from whose point of view. I think from the employees' point of view it doesn't work, because I don't believe it has any impact on the company in any way, and I don't think it speaks with a collective voice.... From a company point of view I think to a certain degree they have achieved a... marginalising the unions to a certain degree on the likes of wage negotiations and that sort of thing.

He cited team briefs and the OES survey as methods used by the company. He saw the company "cherry picking" from OES responses to suit its agenda, then saying "This is what you asked for." However, the company ignored responses asking for improvements in wages and conditions. He saw it as "quite successful for the company, (but) to the detriment of employees".

S saw briefings as very much a one-way affair, with poor or non-existent responses. The employee of another company reported similar state of affairs in his firm. This reaction was very similar to the Coventry responses.

M saw a problem for the unions in that members "like being asked what they think about certain things, and like to feel that they're being listened to", but he added that cynicism about the company's communication was now growing, because they had not seen tangible beneficial results:

> But I think just to have a break from work, and to be able to talk amongst themselves and what have you for an hour, it might be found quite enjoyable.

He found it hard to secure support for bans on team briefs. In response to a question from me, he confirmed that employees found attendance at team briefs "better than working".

D referred to the company's increasing use of glossies, and particularly *Response*. He saw this in terms of union exclusion, but said that it doesn't work. The company tried to "generate policies" through these magazines, but he felt that this was not necessarily successful because:

> it goes overboard, these glossies, and people get hold of them, read a few lines, get fed up, and ditch them in the bin... and they have got a habit of putting more and more of these glossies out as time has gone on. They're using it as another way of trying to get directly to the members.

He mentioned particularly the role of the new booklet, *Response*, but while "it all sounds very good in theory, I don't think it's getting to the root of the problem."

I asked whether there was evidence of growing regionalisation in the company's approach to communication. G felt that the opposite was happening, with the company seeing Liverpool and Coventry as "one site with a 90-mile corridor". J agreed with this assessment.

J saw age as a factor in response, and M alluded to the difficulty of recruiting graduates to the union. Graduates were more likely to see team briefings as "the way forward". J saw students as "looking after themselves" and "individualistic". He said that students tended to be "docile" and no longer to approach the union about joining, as had been the case 15 years ago.

G remarked on the different attitude on the shop floor, where boycotts gained 100% support. I asked why he thought this was the case, and he responded:

> Because I think it's traditional, because the hourly paid have always been, I won't say more militant, but we've held together longer.

He felt that such boycotts were regarded by the company as worse than striking. He mentioned the negative effect of performance-related pay on militancy in "the higher echelons". D once again referred to the difficulty of recruiting graduates as compared to technical trainees (apprentices), a situation similar to that described by Smith (1986a, 1986b) in his research at British Aerospace, Filton. The latter were more likely to be local people while the graduates were recruited from all over the country and were more likely to be "individualists". M saw union density as a factor in responses, with difficulty in boycotting team briefs in areas with low density, where the non-members were attending.

4.7.2 The articles from *GPT Challenge*

Cobbe's article was seen as an example of the "abdication of responsibility" for training by the company. There were frequent references (e.g. by M) to "you" being responsible, where Cobbe had used "we".

I asked what they thought was the purpose of Mr Cobbe's photo. Responses included "Presumably people don't know who Mr Cobbe is, or at least what he looks like." J remarked that it was a standard feature of company magazines. Members also remarked that the union magazines similarly featured photographs of the general secretary. S similarly referred to Tony Blair's appearance in Labour Party publications.

When I asked what Cobbe was trying to do in the article, the first response was:

> I think he's trying to abdicate responsibility for training, and saying to people, well, you know, you've got to take your own responsibility to get trained, and therefore we'll back off... we can't be blamed for it, and therefore we might not even put the resources into it if we don't choose to. I think it's an abdication of responsibility.

Following responses referred to "training on the job" and training at weekends, followed by "and then they go to the Investors In People people and say we encourage people to do it themselves".

J and D mentioned the stress on awards, about which the group as a whole showed considerable cynicism, again mirroring the response in the Coventry focus group. D saw the article as part of the company's publicity aimed at achieving an IIP award, for which GPT had "gone hell bent". D outlined the way in which IIP was announced, with town criers at the front gates, balloons on the fence, placards through the factory. D believed that the publicity should have been through the press, externally targeted and seeking to gain orders, rather than "trying to woo the people in there". It failed with the people in the factory

because they thought it was "over the top". Particularly unfortunate had been references to "doing the double" the day after Liverpool lost to Manchester United.

I asked how, in general terms, the group saw Mr Cobbe going about the transfer of responsibility for training to the individual in the article. Several members responded in terms which substituted 'you' for Mr Cobbe's 'we', such as "you have a responsibility", "you shouldn't be leaving it to the training departments". In response to Mr Cobbe's negative view of the assumption that development equals training course, M said, "That's what we've always done." The article was clearly seen as promoting on the job training, but this met with cynicism from the group - "Give us the chance, Mr Cobbe"

The group felt that pressure of work prevents the training on the job which Mr Cobbe believes is desirable. Colleagues are extremely reluctant to help because PRP encourages them to get on with their own job. The rivalry encouraged by PRP is not conducive to team working. S remarked that people were reluctant to help because they "wanted to be the ones who were able to do everything". She recalled asking a colleague for help, and his responding that he would do it himself on overtime.

I asked for any linguistic features which the group believed were deliberately used by Cobbe. S instanced the use of "we", avoiding the arrogance which would have been evident in using "you". "He's trying to kid you that it is a team." One member of the group (to mutters of assent) defined the answer to Cobbe's question "Whose responsibility is it?" as "It's not my responsibility, it's all yours."

I asked, "Who are 'we'? Are 'we' always the same people?" The initial answer was "the workforce", and a participant pointed out that Cobbe only referred to himself in saying "I am committed to achieving IIP status..." I drew specific attention to the use of 'we' in the first sentence, referring to "our people" and "our greatest challenge". Group members identified 'we' as "management" in this case.

A participant then raised (unprompted) the use of 'you' "when he's telling people what to do". Another participant suggested that "To beat the best you have to be the best" was a similar example. I asked if other people thought that 'you' meant the same here, but a participant intervened to speak about the practical results of what Cobbe was advocating in terms of disadvantages of flexibility. (There did appear to be some murmurs of dissent from the idea that 'you' here means the individual employee. Perhaps ambiguity could here work against the company, in that readers take 'you' to be aimed directly at them, when it is used to mean 'one'.)

I drew attention to the final paragraph of the article. A participant interpreted the paragraph as:

> We're going to do all these things - meaning you - but that doesn't guarantee that you're going to be any better off at the end of it.

I drew attention specifically to the reference to "more emphasis on software". As at Coventry, a specific follow-up question was necessary to elicit a response about the effect of this change of emphasis on manual workers.

I now asked the group to consider the Liverpool NVQ article and it was confirmed that the photographs of people working in Liverpool were genuine. However, G pointed out that in some "GPT propaganda magazines" the photographer's assistant had been known to pose as a worker.

G noted the great emphasis on people in the department, presenting an image of the "caring company" and said that employees were "flattered to think that somebody's taking an interest in them", and wished to form part of the "success" of NVQs. One participant saw NVQs as asking employees what they had been doing for the last ten years, and then giving them an award for it, "and people are made up, because they recognize that the skill they've got is formalised". G urged caution in reading company publications, because the authors interviewed people and "then wrote what they wanted to put down, and not necessarily what the people had actually said."

There was much unprompted questioning of the authenticity of quotations from employees, and in fact outright derision at the idea that people would say some of the things attributed to them. The "lexicon of pleasant surprise" did not convince the participants in the group. There was particular hilarity at quotes like "I was amazed that I could still solder" and "Management were very supportive". Quotations were read out, accompanied by guffaws of laughter from other participants. The perceived lack of realism in the quotations attributed to employees in this article was the source of considerable merriment throughout the remainder of this discussion.

I asked the group to put aside their personal knowledge, and say who, according to the article, introduced NVQs. After some initial suggestions (sounding like guesses or statements of the obvious) of "the company" and "Saint Helens College", I pressed the question, "Does it actually say who introduced them?" The response was "Whoever introduced the pilot scheme." D again said he believed the company introduced it to get IIP status. He emphasised that the company are "in the game of take not give" and would not be involved in NVQs unless there was some gain for the company in it.

The TUC had made some input, and had been keen on NVQs. While the NVQs could be helpful to employees, the company's enthusiasm was seen with some cynicism as using NVQs as a way to get IIP status. One participant quoted the words of Jimmy Grimes about the testing of "our people" against national standards as all that the company was interested in. It was seen as giving the company "another plaque on the wall".

Participants saw the lexicon of pleasant surprise (adding further derisive quotations) as being intended to "create an atmosphere" of a "nice company". There was little or no financial benefit for employees, but the innovation was portrayed in terms of enhancing job security and future prospects.

The company approach was described as "bullshit" by one participant. Gaining NVQs was greeted by the company with invitations to buffets and with levels of publicity which were not given to people gaining academic qualifications including higher degrees. This increased cynicism that the company was using NVQs for its own purposes as "hype" and "propaganda". Even the "overtime soldering" was greeted with cynicism about whether employees were paid. (This stems from the company's introduction of a level of salary - about £18000 - above which people were not paid overtime rates.)

G knew the people involved in the NVQ story, saw them as very compliant, not union-minded, and this reduced the credibility of the article in his eyes. He saw "the blue-eyed syndrome" at work in the main production area in selection of the people named in the article. I suggested that issues such as colleagues' perception of the named employees' competence would affect the credibility of the article. G said, "I'm not saying they're not *competent*..." I then put it directly to G that it appeared from what he had said that his knowledge of the people involved had a negative effect on their credibility, and he confirmed that this was so.

4.7.3 The control article

The chosen article was the June Royal Mail *Courier* front-page story, *Let's get it sorted!* The first question raised, as I asked the group to look at the item, was a question from D (a very experienced lay official) whether the *Courier* was a management or union publication. Subsequent comments made by D demonstrated that he was well informed about the postal strike. With hindsight, however, it may be that his knowledge that the negotiating team's recommendation of acceptance had been overturned had led him to think that the article could have been an attempt by the union leadership to "sell" the deal.

The group certainly had some difficulty in interpreting the presence of the general secretary in the article, and were nonplussed by the "anomaly" of Mr Johnson's "not wanting to disrupt public service" after a strike vote. The only comment on the language of the Courier article was about the "layman's language" such as the headline "Let's get it sorted!" which some felt might indicate trade union provenance. As we shall see in the next case study, an article from *GPT Challenge* presented equal difficulty of interpretation to a group of postal workers.

4.7.4 GPT Liverpool focus group: conclusions

This group revealed many of the same concerns as their Coventry colleagues, often in the same words. Glossy magazines from the company, for example, were "ditched in the bin" after a cursory glance, amid belief that there was an excess of communication from the company, sometimes going "over the top". As at Coventry, the company's communication was dismissed as "bullshit".

Concerns about team briefings were also similar to those at Coventry. Briefs were seen as an attempt at union exclusion, as one-way channels of

communication, as irrelevant in content, and as offering tardy or non-existent responses to employees' questions. There was some ambivalence, in that some employees "liked being asked what they think", while some people regarded attendance as a useful skive, being "better than working", so much so that it was difficult to enforce boycotts of attendance. In shopfloor areas, there was no such difficulty, because of a greater tradition of "sticking together". The *Response* magazine was also seen in terms of union exclusion, as it had been in Coventry. In general, the company was understood by the group to be "cherry picking" from employee responses, choosing those which fitted its agenda, while ignoring those about pay or conditions.

Financial EI, in the form of performance related pay, had had some negative effect on militancy among the "higher echelons" and new graduates were proving difficult to recruit to the union.

When the group were asked to look at the articles, further similarities with Coventry emerged. Mr Cobbe's article was seen as "trying to abdicate responsibility for training" and passing that responsibility to individual employees. Similarly, the participants shared their Coventry colleagues' cynicism about "training on the job" and at weekends, saying that pressure of work did not allow colleagues to assist one another with training on the job. The stress on awards was noticed once again with reference to the company's love of "plaques on the wall", with consequent cynicism about the company's motives in encouraging training.

The group responded more overtly than their Coventry colleagues to direct questions about use of language. An open question about "any specific uses of language by Mr Cobbe", led immediately to S's volunteering his use of 'we' (in what was effectively the disguised second person) avoiding the arrogance of

saying 'you'. Like other groups, the participants also automatically substituted 'you' for 'we' in this usage. The group were able to decode explicitly the multiple use of 'we' in the article. A member of the group also raised unprompted the use of 'you' when Mr Cobbe was "telling people what to do". Interestingly, one member of the group decoded 'you' in the same way in "To beat the best you have to be the best", where I had assumed 'you' to be the equivalent of 'one'. This may indicate that multiple uses of pronouns can act against the company, if a usage is interpreted by readers in a way other than that intended by the author.

As at Coventry, a follow-up question was necessary to elicit a response about the implications for manual workers of the move to software mentioned in the final paragraph. Both groups reacted more strongly and with less need for prompting to the perceived ambiguity of the company's attitude towards training than to the implications of technical change or possible regional differences.

The article about NVQs was interpreted by some participants as trying to present an image of the "caring company" with its emphasis on individuals. There was, as at Coventry, some ambivalence about NVQs, as about training in general, acknowledging the usefulness of the qualification, while questioning the sincerity of the company in "hyping" the qualification as part of its fixation on awards such as IIP and the Queen's Award for Industry, and having some doubt about an academic qualification for what people had been doing for the last ten years.

The group were unanimous in deriding the lexicon of pleasant surprise attributed to the employees in this article. It was apparent from their mirth that the quotations fitted neither their experience of work nor their normal expectations of Scouse working-class speech. When they were asked to say who, according to the article, introduced NVQs, the group were slightly puzzled and did not

explicitly identify the use of the passive to disguise agency, but participants were in no doubt that the company was in reality responsible for their introduction.

As I had expected, the Liverpool participants' interpretation of the story was influenced by some members' direct knowledge of the people involved. The employees were considered to be excessively compliant and not union-minded. This had an adverse effect on their credibility with members of the group.

The control article proved surprisingly difficult for this group to decode, with even an experienced union activist being unsure whether the article came from a Royal Mail or a union publication. Specific difficulty arose from Mr Johnson's allegedly "not wanting to disrupt public service" and the "layman's language" of the headline "Let's get it sorted". The members' resources brought to the decoding of this piece included some memory of the series of strikes in the Royal Mail, including the tentative agreement provisionally by the union negotiators but not ratified. It may be that some idea of a "sell out" underlay the belief that this could have been a union publication trying to commend the deal to members.

Like their Coventry colleagues, this group of employees decoded their employer's communication in an oppositional manner, with many of the same issues arising. However, they appeared more willing than the Coventry participants to give explicit linguistic explanations of their decoding - for example in their raising unprompted the use of the first person plural - although they were not so explicit in their linguistic decoding as the Royal Mail and BT interviewees. I suggest that this may in part at least reflect their bringing to the discussion a different experience as me as an interviewer whom some of them had never met before, while the Coventry participants' responses were conditioned by their previous experience of me as a colleague and senior union representative.

In the light of the plant's traditionally greater militancy, and its history as part of another company until 1988, the similarity of the Liverpool group's responses to those of their Coventry colleagues was remarkable. In many cases, the groups responded to aspects of the company's communication in precisely the same words. It therefore seems likely that the difference in levels of opposition to the company's wishes does not arise from the Coventry employees' greater willingness to believe and act upon the messages of corporate communication, but that the reasons must be sought elsewhere in the labour process.

Chapter 5 Case Study 2 - Royal Mail

5.1 Context - the company, the dispute and communication

The Royal Mail was, as noted above, of particular interest because a recent dispute between the organisation and the Communications Workers Union had led to industrial action, in the form of a series of short strikes, in 1996. This raised the quetsion of whtehr the company's communciation with its employees had simply failed, or whether it had in any way lessened the resolve of workers to take action, thus reducing support for the stoppages or shortening the duration of the dispute.

Both sides in the dispute placed emphasis on communication. Uniquely, the national newspapers of both sides, *Courier* and the *Voice*, had gained awards in their respective spheres. During the dispute, both sides also produced specific material, locally and nationally, about the dispute. There was also a concerted effort by the company to use the national press to exploit perceived divisions within the union executive, by placing with sympathetic newspapers stories which characterised members of the union executive as extremists. In the course of this an internal memo was leaked to the *Guardian* in which the company claimed success in getting a member of the executive, Mr John Keggie, named as a member of the "loony left" in several newspapers. The articles examined below must therefore be seen in an intertextual context, where the intended readership had probably read many other items about the dispute in communications from the company and union and in the national press.

The June issue of *Courier* appeared after the initial vote for action and the July one after strikes had begun. Subsequently, controversy arose when an agreement proposed by Royal Mail, and acceptable to the union leaders present in the

negotiations, was rejected when reported back to the full executive. Press coverage, particularly in the *Daily Mirror*, presented this decision as "undemocratic", and editorials urged a second ballot of the whole membership on the revised offer, in the expectation that a "moderate" membership would overturn the decision of an executive which had routinely been vilified as "extreme". The executive initially refused to call another ballot, but one eventually became necessary when the company threatened legal action after finding a minor irregularity in the initial ballot, namely that the declaration of the result sent to the company had not included the number of spoiled ballots. Since the figure had appeared in the original document, but had been obscured when the copy was made for transmission to the company, some suspicion was aroused on the left within the union that this had been a deliberate act of sabotage by officials who did not want a strike. In any event, any theory that the postal workers were being led by the nose by militant officials was rendered less credible when the second ballot resulted in a decision to continue the action, with an increase in the number of members voting compared with the original ballot. However, the union leadership did not act upon this result by calling further strikes, but by entering further negotiations which led to a settlement that they felt able to recommend to members. The proposed settlement remitted discussion of teamworking to a joint working party. The settlement was trenchantly criticised in left newspapers such as *Socialist Worker*, as was a balloting timetable which made it impossible, if the settlement were rejected, to resume strikes before the Christmas period. The settlement was, however, accepted by an overwhelming majority in a third ballot. Left criticism of the agreement as a sell-out did not seem to have made any impact on either the senior lay officials whom I interviewed or the members of the focus group, all of whom seemed to regard the settlement as a victory for the union.

Underlying the dispute was a very obvious public service ethic on the part of employees and their union, confronting a "business" mindset among the senior managers. This deeper division, I suggest, underlies the articles which I have analysed below.

5.2 Royal Mail - industrial relations and employee involvement

The account which follows is based upon reports of the progress of the dispute in the press, materials from both sides supplied to me, and an interview with union officials similar to those carried out with GPT and BT officials. The interviewees were two senior lay officials of the Communication Workers Union, M and K, both of who spent all their working time on trade union duties. They had responsibility across a wide area of the Midlands. As usual, the interview began with questions about trade union organization in the workplaces for which they were responsible, and continued by examining the categories of employee involvement (EI) defined by Marchington et al. (1992). The material below is organized according to those categories, although the flow of conversation in the interview sometimes allowed M and K to mention aspects of EI before reaching the formal question which I had intended to ask. At the end of the interview, the officials made additional general remarks relevant to the study, which are also indicated below.

5.2.1 Union organization

Managers were organized by the Communications Managers Association (CMA), and technical, clerical and manual staff by the CWU. There was full recognition for individual representation and collective bargaining. (It later became apparent in the conversation that some senior managerial grades did not have union recognition.)

M and K suggested the following approximate figures for the number and proportion of members in each category of worker within the Midlands region, but were unable to estimate union density for management grades represented by the CMA:

CATEGORY	APPROX NUMBER	DENSITY
Managers	1000-1200	Unknown
Technical	500	90% +
Clerical	500 or less	90% +
Manual	16000 or more	95% +

In the context of the Royal Mail, technical workers were mainly engineers and mechanics, and the manual workers mostly postmen and postwomen.

In response to a question about changes in the employer's attitude towards the union during the last five years, the interviewees mentioned the introduction of TQM. In their view, there was some confusion in management's mind about this. Management didn't seem to know if they were using TQM to marginalise the union or for some other purpose. K mentioned an assumption by some managers that "their masters wanted them to be hostile to the unions". If marginalising the union was the employer's aim, "it doesn't work, and causes more problems than any gains they would make". Members would almost always choose to follow the union's position rather than that of management . M and K identified this approach as following a strike in 1988, although they did not see a cause and effect relationship between the strike and TQM. They explicitly referred to TQM and human resources management as an "ideology", and said that it coincided with the employer "getting rid of old style managers" with a "paternalistic" attitude in favour of "young, thrusting, gung-ho" direct entrants. The latter had not yet made much penetration into operations, however, but were largely concentrated in a "consultancy" set up as a separate cost centre.

5.2.2 Employee involvement

Downward communication

Company newspaper

The *Courier* appeared monthly, being delivered directly to employees' homes.

(The interviewees mentioned piles of copies previously being left lying around Royal Mail premises uncollected.) This may have assisted in allowing the company to produce variants on the journal. It was already apparent from samples I had seen that there were regional editions, and I learned from the interviewees that there were also variants on a business division basis (e.g. Royal Mail, Parcelforce, Post Office Counters). It was produced centrally, but with some input from regional journalists and local PR managers. The interviewees were unable to give any direct report on the *Courier's* effectiveness, beyond telling me that it was not a subject of conversation among employees, nor did it feature in representatives' meetings in terms of reaction to company propaganda. Some local offices produced local bulletins, commonly on a quarterly basis.

Company video/audio tapes

Videos were used as "propaganda tools" by the company, having been introduced 12 to 18 months previously. They were shown during working hours to groups of employees taken off their normal duties for this purpose. There was an opportunity for employees to raise questions verbally or in writing. If questions were raised verbally, the managers in attendance could answer at once if they were able to do so, or find out the answer and respond later. The videos were seen as "propaganda" in the context of the recently ended series of strikes, and more generally were perceived as "patronising" in that they sought to teach employees what they already knew about service to the customer.

Employee report

This took the form of an annual supplement to the *Courier*. It made little impact and was not discussed among employees.

Briefing system

A team briefing system had been in operation for some nine years. It took place at the lowest managerial level, being carried out by a manager who supervised about forty postmen and women. It consisted of a core brief, with discretionary input from local management. There was no formal trade union presence in the briefing, but the core brief was sent to trade union representatives under the terms of a collective agreement. Initial union response had been negative, but legal advice had indicated that employees could be compelled to attend (presumably because not doing so would be construed as unlawful industrial action without a ballot) but not to participate. Worker responses included contempt, mirth, or anger if the brief introduced contentious material, such as that which was properly part of bargaining and should not have been included under the terms of the agreement. K said that managers did not enjoy carrying out a brief because of the probable negative response they would receive from their subordinates.

Trade union response

At the local level, this tended to be on an ad hoc basis, rather than the regular production of a leaflet for members. Formal sectional meetings of members were normally held only as part of the report back on industrial relations matters, since company permission was needed for meetings in working time. However, the union was able to make representatives available on a "rolling" basis so that members could be briefed on developments during their meal breaks. Local representatives, and materials they produced, were more important to most members than national union newspapers.

Upward problem solving

Suggestion scheme

There was no formal suggestion scheme in operation, but suggestions were encouraged in general terms.

Attitude survey

The Royal Mail attitude survey was the biggest in the UK. All employees were approached annually, on the basis of 50% of the workforce being surveyed every six months. Participation was high, with some employees being keen to let the organization "know how badly they feel". The union did not object to members participating, its only objection being that the questions were not jointly agreed by the company and the union. The last survey had been cancelled because of the dispute.

Quality circles

These existed, having been introduced about 1990. However, they had not been a success, the rate of participation being described as "very small". The dispute, said K, had "destroyed a lot of them". Some representatives were hostile, others not. Quality circles were the subjective of an agreement with the union. This provided for a formal right of a representative to sit on the QC, and for a veto on any subject which the CWU believed was properly the subject of collective bargaining. K, because of these protections, "didn't see them as particularly threatening", but acknowledged that some representatives "took a different view".

Total quality management

This existed, but was described by M and K as "unsuccessful and expensive".

Introduced after the 1988 dispute to avoid further disputes, as part of "a new way

of doing things". Team working was seen as "the jewel in the crown" for management, "which they're not going to have". The money invested was "wasted". K saw the "return in terms of changing attitudes" as "absolutely nil".

Financial EI

The only example of this was productivity schemes based on a system of unit bonuses. These were not seen as providing a good return to workers.

Representative participation

JCC or Works Council

There was none.

Collective bargaining

This existed, depending on the issue being negotiated, at local, area, divisional and national level. The effect of EI initiatives on collective bargaining was "negligible". K reported very rare examples of a manager attempting to use EI to "sell" a change to members before bargaining began, and then to claim that the union was not accurately representing the views of its members.

Change programme

This was seen in terms of restructuring into divisions, with the publication of a national mission statement, and the introduction of a new accounting system. Managers constantly repeated "the customer, the customer". There was some anger at the use of the "customer" as "an excuse for why our members should have to suffer". It was seen as "patronising" and something of an impertinence, for managers to tell employees that the customer was important, because they were already well aware of this.

General remarks

A conversation followed on aspects of communication in general. M had previously seen a draft of the linguistic analysis of the articles from the *Courier*, while K had not seen my analysis at the time of the interview.

I raised the presentation of Alan Johnson's remarks about the public service ethic in the *Courier*, arising out of the interviewees' remarks about the change programme. M re-emphasised the point that members were already well aware of the customer, because they met the public daily in the course of their work. In M's opinion, members of the union were well aware that the *Courier* was Royal Mail communication, not a joint effort with the CWU, and if members saw Mr Johnson in the *Courier*, they "would think there's a reason for this", in the light of the general reluctance of the newspaper to mention the union. Likewise members would "come to their own conclusions" on reading the next month's edition, from which Mr Johnson had disappeared. K added that "they will now only mention the union if they can mention the union in support of what they're doing." If they had to mention the union in other circumstances, it was only to show the union in the worst possible light.

M said "They have a problem with communication in that they've adopted a managerial lexicon; they cannot abandon it, and it hasn't worked." He added that people would recognize "management-speak" that "didn't relate to actual experiences." It was, he believed, "the only language some of them (i.e. managers) understand". He added, "They have a problem. They are stuck in with a system of communication that is not leading in the direction in which they want to go, and they've been doing this for a long, long time now, and it hasn't succeeded." K and M saw the management's communication during the dispute as an attempt to "drive a wedge within the union".

M said, "Never mind the analysis of the language, there's also the question of linguistic communities, and their leadership have not got a community of language that they're using." Consequently the management had a problem in communicating with employees. I suggested that it was strange that the management persisted in the use of language which seemed almost designed to alienate and irritate those it was supposed to influence. K responded that he had addressed a conference of managers about this - M adding as an aside that when this had been reported by management, K had been called "a postman" with no reference to his position as a lay trade union official. K went on to say that Royal Mail management was "almost like a Masonic organization" in which the ability to speak this language was the equivalent of the Masonic handshake, proving that the manager was a member of the group. The language:

> means nothing to the people you're talking to, but means everything to the people you want to impress, which is usually your manager, and I think it's almost like a Masonic handshake, and if you drop it, then you've actually been expelled from the Masonic lodge, and your career is going to be shit...

He foresaw that this language would continue until the "head of the lodge" decided to drop it. M spoke about the fashion for particular words, referring specifically to the use of "key", as in "key issue", and remembering a memo which had been circulated some years ago when this usage was first introduced., explaining specifically that this "had nothing to do with the use of collection keys" (i.e. the keys used by postmen to open letter boxes). He added:

> I think Royal Mail believes that the use of this type of language has worked in some industries, but maybe if it has, maybe what's worked isn't the use of the language but other things which are going on. And so those other things actually have been empowered and go along with this other language ... income protection, managers being good managers rather than bad managers.

He saw Royal Mail as having "spent a lot of money on this, more than other industries" but with less success.

K added that dismissals were seen by some managers as a necessity for proving oneself as a manager.

5.3 The publication

Courier is a monthly newspaper in tabloid format with sixteen pages. Its design is based on that of the general tabloid press, including such features as very large front-page headlines, subheads consisting of words taken from the body of the text (as shown in the examples below), and sports pages (about company teams and competitions) on the inside back pages. Its target readership consists largely of postmen and women, and it may be that the tabloid format has been chosen as corresponding closely to that of the daily newspapers which these workers are considered likely to read. The newspaper appears in regional editions, with three pages, including the back page, given over to regional news. In addition to news items about the company, such as the "Postie of the Year" competition and a self-congratulatory piece on winning four business newspaper awards, *Courier* includes competitions, "reader offers" and advertisements, including a facility for free advertisements by employees.

With the exception of the articles examined below, *Courier* includes little material dealing with the dispute or the issues involved. The June edition contains one article referring favourably to teamworking, although without direct reference to the company's proposals. The July edition, published after the series of strikes had begun, contains a reader's letter in favour of teamworking and a news item about an opinion survey which has "highlighted the importance of the Employee Agenda and the Agenda for Leadership to everyone in the business". (Contemporaneous union materials put a less favourable gloss on the survey,

showing that on a very high response rate only 22% of employees had thought that the company proposals would make things better for them.) The front-page articles about the dispute were, however, supplemented by other company leaflets and letters during the dispute.

5.4 The articles

The articles to be analysed are the main front-page stories in the Royal Mail internal newspaper, *Courier*, in the June and July issues, 1996. They are respectively the issues preceding and following the start of a series of strikes.

C. Front page article in June edition, after the CWU members had voted for action, but before strikes had begun.

Royal Mail and union chiefs in TV pledge to continue talks

LET'S GET IT SORTED!

EMPLOYEE AGENDA (Note 1)

ROYAL Mail managing director Richard Dykes and CWU joint general secretary Alan Johnson have welcomed a return to talks over the Employee Agenda.

Appearing on national television, Mr Dykes said: "If we can get back round the table there is every hope that we can settle this amicably between us."

Certain

And Mr Johnson agreed. He said: "One thing is for certain - we want to meet Royal Mail. We want to meet them as soon as possible."

Mr Johnson - in Blackpool for the CWU annual conference where it was announced his members had voted for industrial action over the issue - said it did not mean the CWU wanted to disrupt public service.

"We would very much welcome getting back to talks," he added. (Note 2)

After the TV interview, Mr Dykes said: "We recognise there are concerns about the changes we want to make, but it is a real shame people were asked to vote for strike action when negotiations were not finished.

Available

"When the CWU walked away from negotiations in March they knew there was more money available on the pay package and that money is still on the table."

Royal Mail had heard people's views and would act upon them, Mr Dykes said.

"The feedback from 25,000 postmen and women and more than 100 pay-listening sessions has told us that you want your regular and guaranteed weekly earnings and the pensionability of those earnings protected. That is what we are aiming to do."

He added: "We know as well that we need to spend more time explaining our proposals about a new way of working, but a strike won't make these changes go away.

"The fact is a strike now would be disastrous for everyone.

"We are already losing customers to our rivals because as the communications industry changes, customers have more choices than ever before.

Offer

"Industrial action is not inevitable and we believe a deal is possible. (Note 3)There is a lot on offer and a strike will only take us backwards.

"It will put jobs at risk and send our customers into the waiting arms of our competitors - and they may not come back."

Note 1: This subheading appears angled on a shaded background above columns 3 and 4.
Note 2: Quotation repeated, with photograph of Mr Johnson, in the sixth column.
Note 3: Quotation repeated, with photograph of Mr Dykes, in the sixth column.

C1. Content

The article presents, on the one hand, a view that there is a mutual interest between the union and the company in "getting it sorted", while on the other hand, Mr Dykes is seeking to persuade employees who had voted by a substantial majority to go on strike that it would be "disastrous" for them to do so and that the union representatives had "walked away from" negotiations which had not finished. While the piece is presented as a news story, it contains a very high proportion of speech attributed to Mr Johnson and, especially, Mr Dykes. Of 355 words (excluding headline and subheads), 220 are direct or reported speech

attributed to Mr Dykes, with a further forty words attributed to Mr Johnson, giving a total of almost 75% of the article. In fact, the piece is almost as much a direct address by the managing director to the workforce as the Cobbe article in *GPT Challenge*. An intertextual element not immediately apparent to the external reader is that the prominence given to Mr Johnson in this article contrasts with a general reluctance to refer to the union in the *Courier*. (See also the interview with union officials below.)

C2. Non-linguistic features

The headline is underlined, as shown above, and printed in very large type in reversed colours - white on black. The headline block extends from immediately below the title to a point about two thirds of the way down the page, with the text occupying the last third. The words "Employee Agenda" are printed on a shaded block. At the bottom of the page is a strap with a telephone number for employees seeking information. Photographs of Mr Dykes and Mr Johnson, with a quotation (see notes 2 and 3) appear in what would be the sixth column, Mr Dykes' alongside the headline and Mr Johnson's alongside the article itself. The general impression is similar to that of the front page of a national tabloid newspaper.

C3. Vocabulary

A minor, but perhaps significant, deviation from normal English usage is the omission of the definite article from "the Royal Mail". This usage is followed by both sides in the dispute: the use attributed to Mr Johnson accurately reflects his practice of omitting the article in internal union documents, and I have followed this usage in referring to the company here. It may perhaps be the case that the article has been omitted as part of a drive towards a "business" ethos rather than a public service culture, since companies do not generally include the definite article in their names.

In the "strap" above the headline, there is a potential ambiguity:

> Royal Mail and union chiefs in TV pledge to continue talks

This could mean either:

> The chiefs of Royal Mail and of the union....

or

> Royal Mail and the chiefs of the union....

The latter, on the basis that "union chiefs" is a common form of reference to senior union officials in tabloid newspapers, may seem to be the more likely interpretation. I would not wish to exaggerate the importance of this usage, but it is sometimes used to emphasize a difference between leaders and led in the labour movement. The generally positive nature of the references to Mr Johnson in this article may, however, make this interpretation less likely. Again, the use of the plural, while Mr Johnson is the only member of the executive cited by name, may mean that the former meaning is more likely.

More generally, I believe that three dichotomies underlie the vocabulary used in this article. One is the dichotomy between a view that the differences between the two sides are a problem that can be "sorted" with mutual goodwill and Mr Dykes' need to justify the employer's position in the face of an overwhelming ballot for industrial action. This manifests itself in a rather cliched lexicon, in which the two sides "get back round the table" to "settle this amicably between us", because "money is still on the table". On the other hand, in registering a failure to agree, the union has "walked away from negotiations" and "a strike would be disastrous for everyone". Mr Dykes seeks to combine reasonableness with adherence to management's line when he says:

> We know as well that we need to spend more time explaining our proposals about a new way of working, but a strike won't make the changes go away.

However, to suggest that employees are not complying with management wishes because they have not understood the proposals does seem rather to run the risk of further alienating the workers by appearing to condescend to them.

The second dichotomy which may be detected here is that between the public service ethos and that of business. The words quoted from Mr Johnson include a denial that "the CWU wanted to disrupt public service". There appears here to be an attempt to appeal, through his words, to an ethic which continues to hold sway among many workers in the public sector and in recently privatised utilities (O'Connell Davidson 1994). Mr Dykes' own words, however, rely much more upon a business ideology of "customers" and "competitors", the

"communications industry" and "change". The apparent mutual interest in retaining customers and fighting off competitors is, however, not straightforward. There are contradictions in that Royal Mail's most prized customers are businesses, whose postal service is not labour intensive, unlike a domestic round, and that there are few competitors for the business of domestic customers. This dichotomy is also apparent in the July article examined below.

The third dichotomy lies in the perceived levels of militancy of the professional officials, particularly Mr Johnson, the lay members of the executive, and the general membership of the union. The CWU's postal section had traditionally been "moderate", supporting the right wing of the Labour Party, with Alan Johnson in particular being seen as an ally of Tony Blair. (Since the dispute, Mr Johnson has in fact become a Labour Member of Parliament in the 1997 British general election.) Even John Keggie, the executive member portrayed as an extreme left-winger by some sections of the press, had supported the abolition of the Labour Party's commitment to public ownership. During the dispute, efforts were made to portray the executive as left-wingers who were out of touch with the membership. The progress of the dispute casts doubt upon this stereotype. Mr Johnson's "pledge to continue talks" follows a decision by "his members" to vote for industrial action after "the CWU" had walked away from negotiations. It is, according to Mr Dykes, "a real shame people were asked to vote for strike action when negotiations were not finished". The difficulty which Mr Dykes has to reconcile is that most of his intended audience will have voted for industrial action. Reference to "the CWU" and Mr Johnson's "members" and "people" serves to avoid directly confronting the readership as would the use of 'you'. The terminology used appears to be designed to place responsibility for the dispute neither on Mr Johnson nor on the union members to whom the article is addressed, but on some undefined element within the union who abandoned negotiations before they were complete and then asked people unnecessarily to

vote for strike action. Allied with this is a "common sense" lexicon about the undesirability of industrial action: a strike "would be disastrous for everyone" and will "only take us backwards". This is perhaps also intended to appeal to the perceived "moderation" of the union membership.

C4. Pronouns

The only use of 'you(r)' occurs in the ninth paragraph:

> The feedback from 25,000 postmen and women and more than 100 pay-listening sessions has told us that *you* want *your* regular and guaranteed weekly earnings and the pensionability of those earnings.

These words, attributed to Mr Dykes, are clearly using the second person to address all employees. Effectively, the use of 'you' attributes the same concerns to all employees, and seeks to separate out from the issues on which disagreement existed those which in Mr Dykes' view were most important to his subordinates.

The first person plural is used much more frequently. In all but one case, it occurs in test attributed to Mr Dykes or Mr Johnson. The one exception occurs in the headline:

> LET'S GET IT SORTED!

Here 'we' (represented by 'apostrophe s') appear to be both parties to the dispute. However, it is unclear who is meant to be the speaker. It would be possible to infer that the author is attributing these words to Mr Dykes and Mr Johnson, with 'we' including the Royal Mail management and employees, together with the union's full-time officials.

The same meaning of the two sides in negotiations also appears to be clear in the words of Mr Dykes quoted in the second paragraph:

> If *we* can get back round the table there is every hope that *we* can settle this amicably between *us*.

In this case, however, 'we' may need to be defined much more narrowly as the representatives of the two sides actually present in negotiations.

In the next three paragraphs (3 to 5), Alan Johnson is quoted, using the first person plural to refer to the trade union side in the negotiations. It is unclear whether Mr Johnson has in mind the membership as a whole, the executive, or those specific individuals who will conduct the negotiations. A particular difficulty of interpretation arises here, for the words attributed to Mr Johnson are chosen from a presumably much longer text by an author representing the company side in the dispute. In this context, the more important question is perhaps not who Mr Johnson understood to constitute 'us', but rather who the author wishes the reader to believe that he meant. I hypothesised that the probable intention was to appeal to the stereotypical view of "moderate" membership and general secretary, as against a "militant" executive, and that the author intends Mr Johnson's 'we' to be "the rank and file members and I".

From the sixth paragraph onward, all uses of the first person plural occur in speech attributed to Richard Dykes. From paragraph 6 to paragraph 10, all the uses seem unequivocally to be in reference to the company and its management (exclusive 'we'), for example:

> *We* recognise that there are concerns about the changes *we* want to make.... (para. 6)
> The feedback ... has told *us* that you want.... This is what *we* are aiming to do. (para. 9)

Similarly, in paragraph 13, "*we* believe a deal is possible" seems to refer to management.

Otherwise, however, Mr Dykes' usage in the last three paragraphs (12-14) appears to be the inclusive use, assuming that the audience is part of 'us':

> *We* are already losing customers to *our* rivals.... (para. 12)
> There is a lot on offer and a strike can only take *us* backwards. (para. 13)
> It will put jobs at risk and send *our* customers into the waiting arms of *our* competitors.... (para. 14)

The example in paragraph 13 follows immediately after the previously cited exclusive use.

Thus the article progresses through a series of four uses of the first person plural, beginning with reference to the two sides in negotiations. I suggest that the references in speech attributed to Mr Johnson must be interpreted, not primarily as he may have originally intended, but as the reporter intends them to be, and I have tentatively suggested that in this case 'we' are Mr Johnson and the rank and file members, over against the executive. After several paragraphs in which Mr Dykes uses the first person plural to mean 'we, the management' exclusively, in the last three paragraphs an inclusive use, in which the reader is part of 'us', predominates. This multiplicity of usage is potentially mystificatory, if the reader does not understand that 'we' can be different people at different places in the text..

C5. Syntactic transformation and the verb

Perhaps because of the heavy reliance upon quotations from speech, the article is relatively sparing in its use of the nominal and passive transformations.

Among the nominalizations, perhaps the most significant is the repeated reference to "changes" (in paragraphs 6 and 10). The concept of change is of considerable importance in contemporary business vocabulary, frequently being presented as a desirable, and indeed inevitable, part of business life:

> We recognise there are concerns about the changes we want to make...
> ... a strike won't make the changes go away.

The same word appears as a verb in paragraph 12 ("as the communications industry changes"). The nominalization can be expanded simply as:

> Someone changes something.

if a transitive use is implied, or

> Something changes.

when intransitive use seems more probable. The nominalization omits the syntactic subject, so that responsibility for the change is not identified. However, the use of "we want to make" in the first example cited does attribute responsibility to 'us'. The success or failure of the nominalization in disguising responsibility for the "changes" will therefore to some extent depend upon whether the readers decode "we" inclusively or exclusively.

As in the piece about NVQs at GPT, Liverpool, "concerns" are felt by workers about the changes. Again, the number of concerns and of people who experienced them, and the nature of the concerns are glossed over by the nominalization.

Use of the passive transformation is restricted to three examples. In paragraph 4, "it was announced" that CWU members had voted for action. The passive may perhaps be used here in preference to attributing the announcement to Alan Johnson, who is otherwise presented as seeking a solution to the problems around the Employee Agenda.

The remaining two uses of the passive are found in a single sentence, attributed to Richard Dykes:

> We recognise there are concerns about the changes we want to make, but it is a real shame people *were asked* to vote for strike action when negotiations *were not finished.*

In the first case, the passive seems to be used in order to avoid attributing agency to Mr Johnson for calling the vote and to the employees whom Mr Dykes is trying to influence for voting in favour of striking. The second use of the passive, in the claim that negotiations were not finished, is interesting in that it presents a tendentious opinion - indeed, one which would seem to fly in the face of the truth - as established fact. It is arguable that "finished" here has a purely adjectival meaning, but I would tentatively suggest that even if this is so, it retains the syntactic structure of a phrase which could be transformed back to:

> Someone did not finish negotiations.

I would suggest that by assuming the subject that appears to be required, we may arrive at the meaning:

> *The CWU* did not finish negotiations.

This interpretation would probably be placed upon the passive transformation by CWU officials who were present at the negotiations, but rejected by them as untrue. The normal procedure in British industrial relations practice is for a meeting to conclude either with an agreement or by the side which has requested change registering a failure to agree. The matter then goes to a meeting at the next stage of procedure, or if the meeting is at the last stage, a union which has registered a failure to agree may decide to ballot its members for industrial action. If the meeting is initiated by management, a failure to agree at the final stage may be followed by an attempt unilaterally to impose the change. This particular dispute was somewhat complicated by the fact that both sides wanted change: the unions a better wage and the company changes to working practices. The fact of the matter seems to be that the CWU regarded further discussion as pointless, and consequently registered a failure to agree before proceeding to

ballot its members. Thus, Mr Dykes' claim that "negotiations were not finished" seems to be intended to persuade employees that further negotiation could have taken place, although their union officials had decided that there was no prospect of agreement.

Compared with the article by Mr Cobbe in *GPT Challenge*, this article makes little use of the technique of placing meaning in non-finite verbs rather than the syntactic main verb. This may well reflect the conscious adoption of a tabloid style as appropriate for the intended readership. Indeed, the article, with 51 finite verbs, only includes 14 non-finite verb forms (including one nominal use of 'working'). Of these, six follow modal verbs or equivalents, such as 'want', 'need' or 'can'. Similarly, the few examples of embedded subordination - one of which is attributed to Alan Johnson - have 'say' or mental process verbs such as 'know' or 'recognise' as their main verb, and it would be difficult to argue that they are used in a mystificatory way. The text attributed to Mr Dykes is notable for the relatively high occurrence in the written language of sentences containing co-ordinate clauses linked by 'and'. This gives equal weight to the verbs of the clauses so joined. Of the six examples attributed to him, two occur in the single sentence forming the last paragraph. These usages are typical of spoken discourse, and therefore to be expected in direct speech. The article is silent about the circumstances in which Mr Dykes said what is attributed to him "after the TV interview". Three possibilities would be that the words were spoken by Mr Dykes in an interview, perhaps with the anonymous author of the article; that Mr Dykes wrote the text himself; or that his views, available from other sources, have been cast into the style of the spoken language by the author. In any event, the choice of the format of an interview, with spoken discourse attributed to Mr Dykes, is very different from the authored article chosen by Mr Cobbe as the vehicle for addressing his subordinates. Two possible reasons present themselves: that Mr Dykes believes that the immediacy of direct speech, combined with the

"objectivity" of a report by a journalist, gives a greater sense of sincerity than would an authored article; or that speech allows him to use simple sentence structures and vocabulary without the obvious condescension of doing so in "written" language.

C6. Transitivity

The article contains 25 uses of human beings (agents) as subjects of finite verbs. (For the purpose of this section, I will assume that "customers" are human beings rather than institutions.) Mr Dykes and Mr Johnson appear together as the subject of "have welcomed" in the opening paragraph, and each subsequently appears alone, by name or indicated by the pronoun 'he' as the subject of a further four verbs. Customers (or 'they') appear twice, 'you' (the assumed audience) and "people" each occur once, the latter as the subject of the passive construction "were asked to vote". By far the most common human agent in the article is 'we', which occurs as the subject of 12 finite verbs, with the following meanings:

the two sides in negotiations	2 occurrences
the union (Mr Johnson)	3
Royal Mail management	6
management and workers	1

Thus 'we', the management, is the most prominent human agent in the piece. It is notable that five of these occurrences occur as the subject of verbs which seek to conciliate the workforce, sometimes with a positive modality of desirability:

> We recognise there are concerns;
> we are aiming to (meet concerns about earnings);
> We know as well we need to spend more time explaining our proposals;
> we believe a deal is possible

When we turn to institutions as syntactic subjects, the CWU (or 'they') occurs three times and Royal Mail only once. Other syntactic subjects are definite entities ("the communications industry", "money", "negotiations") or impersonal

forces (empty 'it', 'that', 'one thing', 'there' in existential sentences). However, the most notable non-human subject is "strike" (or 'it'), which is the subject of five finite verbs. The term "industrial action" is also used once. Thus, a strike or an equivalent is the subject of six finite verbs. No other abstract noun is the subject of more than one verb, and even empty 'it' and existential 'there is/are' only make three appearances each. In every case, "strike" or its equivalent occurs in a context where there is a strong negative modality of desirability.

Turning to syntactic objects, there are few unequivocal examples of the patient role in the piece. Nouns or pronouns referring to human beings occur only three times as the direct object of a verb: two occurrences of "customers" and one of 'us', management and workers. "People" appears in a patient role as the subject of the passive verb "were asked", and 'us', the management, as indirect object of "told".

C7. Modality

This article is notable mainly for its heavy use of the modality of desirability, both positive and negative, for example:

> (Mr Dykes and Mr Johnson) have welcomed a return to talks;
> there is every hope that we can settle this;
> One thing is certain - we want to meet Royal Mail. We want to meet them as soon as possible;
> a strike now would be disastrous for everyone;
> (A strike) will put jobs at risk and send our customers into the waiting arms of our competitors.

Thus, there is a heavy stress on the desirability of further talks and on the undesirability of strike action.

A modality of truth is also present. Certainty is explicitly attributed to Mr Johnson's wish to meet Royal Mail, and the CWU is said to have "known" that

more money was available. Perhaps a more complex modality of truth can be found in Mr Dykes' words:

> That is what we are aiming to do.
> ... we believe a deal is possible.

These statements do not perhaps so much claim factual veracity as invite the reader to believe in Mr Dykes' honesty and good intentions.

C8. General conclusions

Three major contradictions underlie this article:

1. between presentation of the dispute as a mutual problem to be resolved by goodwill and advancing the management viewpoint;
2. between the employees' public service ethic, to which the article seeks to appeal, and a business ethos;
3. between appealing to perceived "moderates" in the union and blaming the situation upon elements which are not named in the article, but which may be deduced intertextually to be "militant" unionists.

These dichotomies manifest themselves linguistically in several ways, of which the following appear to be most prominent.

A rather cliched lexicon of industrial relations is used stressing the benefits of further discussion and the pointlessness of industrial action. A business lexicon in the text attributed to Mr Dykes contrasts with an appeal, through text attributed to Mr Johnson, to the workers' ethic of public service. Vocabulary and transitivity "distance" the workers whom the article is addressing (and Mr Johnson) from those who had taken the decision to strike.

Human agency in the piece is largely 'we', the management, responsible for several positive initiatives, while among non-human syntactic subjects "a strike"

or "industrial action" predominates, with a strong negative modality of desirability.

D. Front page article, Courier, July 1996, by-lined "Report by Sarah Kitt", appearing after strikes had begun

CLOSING IN FOR THE KILL

Postal strike clears way for competitors to move in and steal business

COMPETITORS closed in on Royal Mail customers with ferocious speed as they took advantage of industrial action by postal workers.

Companies flooded national newspapers with unprecedented advertising and covered billboards with the same message: to encourage business customers to switch to fax or electronic mail rather than the post.

And Royal Mail managing director Richard Dykes said he feared the strike action would undermine the confidence of customers who could be lost forever.

"There are already increasing demands for the monopoly to be removed," he said.

Choices

Mr Dykes added: "We just can't rely on winning their business back," he said. "The development of the fax machine and electronic mail means that there are more choices for customers, and, once they switch from using the post, there is a very real risk they may never come back.

"Strike action is pointless. Far from securing the future of Royal Mail employees, it puts jobs and the present business at great risk." (Note 1)

Royal Mail estimates that every one per cent of business lost means about 1,500 jobs could be at risk.

Mr Dykes pointed to the impact of last year's prolonged industrial action in France which had a devastating effect on the French postal authority. It lost a massive ten per cent of its business customers to competitors.

Mr Dykes hopes Royal Mail will not meet the same fate.

But after the last national postal strike in 1988, Royal Mail lost business to the rising number of fax machines installed by businesses.

Installations have been increasing at a yearly rate of 30 per cent and, coupled with electronic mail and the Internet, their use tends to double during strike periods.

Customers will also increasingly use the telephone - particularly telesales services - and many may decide to switch their bill paying to direct debit or an alternative payment system.

And, Mr Dykes said, prolonged industrial action will inevitably result in some of Royal Mail's customers going out of business. Mail order companies are particularly vulnerable as they rely heavily on postal deliveries.

Mr Dykes said he had hoped to resolve negotiations with the Communications Workers Union over the Employee Agenda proposals on pay and working conditions.

"I am bitterly disappointed the CWU and its members have resorted to industrial action.

"Employees said they were worried about pay and job security so we addressed these issues. We have offered more money, job security into the next century and a shorter working week through the Employee Agenda.

"Everyone stands to gain a great deal from this package and it is vital the union sees the advantages of it for their members and thinks again."

Note 1: This paragraph is repeated, slightly abbreviated, with a photograph of Mr Dykes.

D1. Content

The article, cast in the form of an interview with Richard Dykes, claims that the industrial action, which had by now begun, was benefiting the company's competitors, that lost business would not easily be regained, and that this would have an adverse effect on job security. It is also claimed that the dispute could cause the company to lose its monopoly on the delivery of letters and small packages. The article makes specific claims that the French postal service lost ten per cent of its business customers during a strike in 1995, and that the use of fax and other electronic means of communication "tends to double" during disputes.

Once again, the piece is effectively a direct address by the managing director to the workforce. Of seventeen paragraphs, eleven are explicitly attributed to Mr Dykes. A further three paragraphs (10 to 12) are embedded within the text attributed to Mr Dykes, and could reasonably be interpreted as also being his utterances. A further paragraph, also embedded within the text attributed to him, begins "Royal Mail estimates...." and it could again be inferred that Mr Dykes is the source for the estimate. Only the opening two paragraphs are unequivocally the authorial voice of the reporter.

The piece shows substantial linguistic differences from the June article analysed above.

D2. Non-linguistic features

The headline shown above once again appears in very large print, in reversed colours. However, while the June headline had been placed on a black rectangle extending across the full width of the page, the background in the July article extends from top to bottom of the page, forming a border within which the text is placed in the three left columns. To the right of the text, also on the black background, is a photograph of Mr Dykes, with a quotation from him. Significantly, there is no photograph of Mr Johnson with this article. The right edge of the black background is formed into an arrow shape, pointing into a sidebar showing advertisements from Royal Mail's competitors. The telephone hot line is given again this month, this time in a small block placed between columns one and two of the article.

D3. Vocabulary

The vocabulary of reconciliation prominent in the June article has disappeared in this piece. The nearest equivalent is perhaps Mr Dykes' statement that he is "bitterly disappointed the CWU and its members have resorted to strike action",

which does retain the use of the third person to avoid saying that Mr Dykes is disappointed with 'you', the workers. The only worker interest to which Mr Dykes appeals is job security, through the negative association of striking with job losses.

The lexicon of business, however, is more prominent in this article than in the June one. "Customers", especially "business customers" and their "choices", are mentioned throughout the piece. The success of failure of this appeal to a business ethos will depend upon the extent to which it is shared by the persons being addressed. To succeed, the article must persuade postmen and women, who may spend all their time on a mainly domestic round, of the importance of the profitable, but less labour-intensive, service to business customers. Again, postal workers on domestic deliveries might find it difficult to see the fax or electronic mail as serious competitors for domestic business. It may perhaps be inferred from the continuation of the strike and the vote for further action in the second ballot that this appeal to the business ethic was not successful.

The language of conciliation is not only absent from this article, but it is replaced by a rather strident lexicon of crisis, from the headline onwards, with some evidence of over-lexicalisation. Competitors "close in for the kill" with "ferocious speed" and "move in and steal business". Mr Dykes hopes that Royal Mail will not "meet the same fate" as its French equivalent. The metaphor of theft in the reference to competitors' "stealing" business is particularly striking, presenting normal commercial competition as criminal activity. The role played by verbs in this vocabulary is reviewed in more detail in section D6, dealing with transitivity.

Among minor features of vocabulary, Mr Dykes says that among the things offered by Royal Mail is "job security into the next century". At the time that the

article was written, it was only three years and five months until the beginning of the next century. I hypothesised that the use of this terminology might prove counterproductive, engendering cynicism rather than confidence.

D4. Pronouns

The piece contains no occurrences of 'you(r)'. The use of third person pronouns and 'I' is unremarkable, except for the article's closing claim that "Everyone stands to gain a great deal from this package". This would certainly be seen as tendentious by the union, which believed that some grades would lose pay or seniority.

The use of the first person plural is strikingly different in this piece, when compared with the June article. There are only three uses of 'we' in the article, all in speech attributed to Richard Dykes:

> *We* just can't rely on winning their business back.
> Employees said they were worried about pay and job security so *we* addressed these issues. *We* have offered more money, job security into the next century and a shorter working week through the Employee Agenda.

The first use of 'we' is the only one which may be intended to be inclusive - 'we, managers and workers'. The other two uses are unequivocally 'we, the management' over against employees, whose concerns are addressed and to whom offers are made. This is in marked contrast to the previous month, where the first person plural had been used more frequently, and had referred to various groupings of people. The restricted use of the first person plural in this piece perhaps indicates that battle lines have been drawn, with the beginning of industrial action, and the company now sees itself as 'us' and the union as 'them'.

D5. Syntactic transformation and the verb

The passive is unequivocally used only once in this article. Two other uses of 'to be' with the past participle appear to be purely adjectival. The unequivocal example is:

> ...the confidence of customers could be lost forever.

In this case, the transformation removes responsibility for the loss of confidence from:

> Someone (or something) loses the confidence of customers.

but it is questionable whether the omission of the subject assists Mr Dykes' case, since it would appear to be his view that the cause of lost confidence is:

> The CWU's strike loses the confidence of customers.

If this is so, it would appear to strengthen his case to say so explicitly.

Nominalization is also limited in this piece. Of particular interest is Mr Dykes' assertion that:

> There are already increasing demands for the monopoly to be removed.

The nominalization "demands" may be expanded:

> Someone is demanding more than one thing.

or

> More than one person is demanding something.

The context here, with the identification of the single demand for the removal of the monopoly, requires the latter. The nominalization is accompanied by the use of the existential sentence form "there are....", which removes the syntactic subject and semantic agent. Thus, the sentence could be regarded as a

transformation of the following sentence in the active voice with the agent expressed:

> An increasing number of unidentified persons is demanding that the monopoly be removed.

Cast in this form, the statement prompts the questions:

> Who is demanding this? How many people?

In fact, such demands are largely restricted to a small number of people on the ideological right, and it may be that Mr Dykes and the author of the article do not wish to phrase the sentence in a way which would bring these questions to mind. There may be some mystification at work here.

D6. Transitivity

A notable feature of this article is the association of various subjects with different groups of verbs.

In the headline and opening paragraphs of the article, the company's **competitors** predominate as the semantic agent and syntactic subject. They appear mainly as the subject of verbs of physical action and movement, used in rather cliched metaphors. Thus, the competitors:

close in for the kill
move in
steal business
take advantage of industrial action
flood (newspapers with advertisements)
cover (billboards)

The intention seems to be to establish an atmosphere of crisis at the start of the article.

The company's **customers** appear as the subject of several verbs, of which "switch" is the most common, referring to the possibility that they will transfer

their business to competitors, and also as the subject of "may never come back". They also appear as subjects of what might be called "verbs of victimhood" - "going out of business"; "are ... vulnerable".

Royal Mail , too, is the subject of "verbs of victimhood". It "lost business"; it may "meet the same fate" as the French postal service; "can't rely on winning (customers) back". It also appears indirectly as 'we, the management', as discussed in section D4, bringing forward positive proposals to resolve the dispute. One minor usage which may be significant is:

> Royal Mail estimates that every one per cent of business lost means about 1,500 jobs could be at risk.

I have suggested above that it might be inferred from the embedding of this sentence within speech attributed to Richard Dykes that he is the source of this information. It may perhaps be the case that the company name is used here, rather than "Mr Dykes" or 'we, the management', to lend an air of objectivity to the estimate.

Royal Mail's **employees** appear only as the subject of:

> Employees said they were worried about pay and job security.....

The **union** only appears when Mr Dykes expresses the views that:

> I am bitterly disappointed the CWU and its members have resorted to industrial action.
> ... it is vital the union sees the advantages for their members and thinks again.

The **strike** (or equivalent nominal groups such as "industrial action") appears as the subject of several verbs, always in text attributed to Mr Dykes:

> ... strike action would undermine the confidence of customers...
> Strike action is pointless.
> (A strike in the French postal service) had a devastating effect...
> ...prolonged industrial action will inevitably result in ... customers going out of business

Thus, the article continues to present the employees whom it is addressing as removed from the responsibility for the strike. The strike is to some extent attributed to "the CWU and its members" but is largely presented almost as if it has a life of its own, acting as a force in Fowler's terminology. Two contradictions are perhaps to be discerned here. One is Royal Mail's need to persuade employees to abandon the strike, while not alienating them. This may perhaps account for this presentation of the strike as a force. The other dichotomy lies in the two-pronged nature of Mr Dykes' attack on industrial action: it is at the same time "pointless" (para. 6) and "devastating" (para. 8). Mr Dykes seeks on the one hand to persuade his subordinates that striking will achieve nothing, but on the other that its effect will be to lose customers, and therefore jobs.

Mr **Dykes** himself appears as the subject of several verbs, either in the third person or as 'I' in direct speech. As might be expected in an article with a substantial element of speech, he appears frequently as the subject of "said" or an equivalent ("added", used redundantly since "said" is also used in reference to the same section of direct speech, and "pointed to" leading into a section of reported speech). In each of these cases the verb chosen is one which does not indicate uncertainty about the truth of his utterance, as "believed" or "thought that" might do. Mr Dykes refers to himself in the first person only once:

> I am bitterly disappointed the CWU and its members have resorted to industrial action.

There are a further two examples of reported speech, which could be transformed to produce utterances as follows:

> (Mr Dykes) said he feared the strike action would undermine the confidence of customers...

giving Mr Dykes' own words:

I fear that the strike action will undermine the confidence of customers....

and:

Mr Dykes hopes Royal Mail will not meet the same fate.

based on Mr Dykes' utterance:

I hope that Royal Mail will not meet the same fate.

In each case, Mr Dykes is the agent of a verb of mental process with a very strong modality of desirability, positive or negative. The intention seems to be to emphasize Mr Dykes' anxiety for a solution.

D7. Modality

The modality of **truth** is present mainly implicitly, in that a statement of fact is inherently making a claim for veracity, and in the use of direct speech by Mr Dykes, implying that he is personally vouching for the truth of the claims made. Particularly noteworthy is the claim to truth of confident statements about future events:

> Customers will also increasingly use the telephone...
> And, Mr Dykes said, prolonged industrial action will inevitably result in some of Royal Mail's customers going out of business.

In the latter case, the modality of truth is strengthened by the explicit use of the adverb "inevitably".

Not all of Mr Dykes' predictions are couched in terms of such certainty. A modality of **possibility** also appears in:

> ... there are more choices for customers, and, once they switch from using the post, there is a very real risk that they may never come back.
> ... about 1,500 jobs could be at risk.
> ... their use tends to increase during strike periods.
> ... many (customers) may decide to switch their bill paying to direct debit...

The last example immediately follows the modality of truth in Mr Dykes' assertion that "customers will ... increasingly use the telephone", and the third

follows an assertion that fax installations have been increasing at thirty per cent per annum. The close proximity of the modality of truth may perhaps strengthen the modality of possibility, although this would not be the case if the employees did not believe the facts being asserted as true.

Most notable, however, is the prominent modality of **desirability** in this article. The vocabulary of crisis plays an important part in this. So also does the use, noted in section D6, of the strike, or an equivalent term, as the syntactic subject of several clauses in which it is portrayed as having undesirable consequences such as loss of business. Additionally, there are explicit expressions of desirability, most obviously negative:

> (Richard Dykes) feared the strike action would undermine the confidence of customers.
> I am bitterly disappointed the CWU and its members have resorted to industrial action.

In one case, there is an unequivocal expression of a positive modality of desirability:

> Mr Dykes said he hoped to resolve negotiations...

In another example, Mr Dykes expresses the positive modality of desirability in hoping that an undesirable consequence will not arise:

> Mr Dykes hopes that Royal Mail will not meet the same fate.

The article ends with a very strong indication of positive desirability ('it is vital') in a usage which similarly points at the same time to the undesirability of the CWU not concurring with Mr Dykes' wishes:

> ... it is vital the union sees the advantages of it for their members and thinks again.

D8. General conclusions

The changed situation, with the beginning of industrial action since the June article, is reflected in linguistic change. This is most obvious in vocabulary, where the language of reconciliation which was so apparent in the previous month's article has disappeared, being replaced with a lexicon of crisis. This change is perhaps emphasised by the non-linguistic feature of the omission of Alan Johnson's photograph from the July article. The lexicon of business, already evident in the June article, remains, and is perhaps even more in evidence in the July article. Another prominent linguistic change is the disappearance, apart from one doubtful occurrence, of inclusive 'we' from this article, in marked contrast to the previous month's piece.

However, some linguistic features of the earlier article continue to be used in this piece. Retained from June is a very noticeable use of the modality of desirability, with the strike appearing frequently as the subject of clauses with a negative modality of desirability. Also retained is the avoidance of any linguistic connection of the workers being addressed to responsibility for the strike. The strike almost appears to have a life of its own, and "the CWU and its members", in a very highly unionised industry, are treated as if they were something completely separate from the workers whom Mr Dykes is addressing. A third major feature retained in this article is the heavy reliance upon the "interview" format with heavy use of direct speech attributed to Mr Dykes. I have suggested that this allows the use of simple structures which might appear condescending if cast in the form of an authored article by the managing director. It may also be designed, in conjunction with the modality of desirability, to allow Mr Dykes, in expressing his hopes and fears, to present himself as an honest or ordinary man to his subordinates.

5.5 Royal Mail focus group

The group consisted of four postmen and a postwoman. All were based in the same extremely large sorting office in a large city in the Midlands. All were trade union representatives: one of them enjoying full-time facilities, the others being normally engaged in postal duties and taking time off as necessary for union

duties. The lay officials who had previously been interviewed did not form part of this group.

5.5.1 Communication in general

The group responded to my invitation to speak about their employer's communication in general. The first contribution was made by the member of the group who was the senior representative. He instanced team briefings and quality circles as methods that were used by the employer, although the latter had "diminished considerably", as well as magazines and the "occasional mailshot". He continued:

> My view in general terms would be that the Royal Mail really has lost touch with its employees, and the content of its communication and the way in which it has been communicated to us reflects that - the gap between what Royal Mail says in its communications and what people's experience is day to day on the floor. And I think the *Courier* I would say is perhaps the most dramatic example of that, where you constantly get headlines which are meant to be sort of positive and encouraging and optimistic and uplifting, and usually associated, as in this case (*holding up a recent issue of the* Courier *and showing articles*) with a personal story, with happy smiling postmen and postwomen, which you are meant to connect with the main story. The main story usually conceals a considerable amount of pain for our members in terms of the loss of jobs, loss of earnings, changes in working practices and conditions, which is presented to you as if it's ... as if you've just won the lottery, but actually the truth of the matter is it's really bad news. But it's presented in such a way and associated with other - kind of what they would call human stories - to persuade us that it's all good news. (*Murmur of agreement from another member.*) I think that one of the fundamental mistakes that Royal Mail has made - and I think to add insult to injury it was probably made deliberately - is they think because they do it, they think because they communicate, because they present it, because they've got these mechanisms of communication, that that's the end of the story; they're not really analysing in my view the effectiveness of their message, or how the message corresponds with the reality of the employee. That would be one of the big problems I would see, and the language that they use of course reflects this. They've chosen their own vocabulary; they've chosen their own set of mission and values, and their own language. It's not everyday language, it's not anybody else's language, it's not the workforce's language. So it seems to me that the Royal Mail has sort of, you know, cut itself off from really being able to get its message across. That would be my sort of general view of the problem that Royal Mail has in communicating with us.

He continued by commenting that in the dispute "every time Royal Mail communicated about it, it drove people further and further into the trenches in terms of opposing what Royal Mail wanted to do", so much so that the union needed to put out very little counter-communication. Another member of the group referred to a "credibility gap" between the employing organization and the workforce.

Another member drew attention to the existence of other employer publications on a local basis, in addition to the *Courier*, which was a Midlands edition of a national newspaper. He said that such publications were in "a similar tone, all laughing, all smiling". The senior rep spoke again, drawing attention to an article in a recent issue of the *Courier* about an £85 million investment in automated sorting equipment, juxtaposed with a human interest story with "a happy smiling postman" and the headline "What a smashing time!" He perceived this juxtaposition as deliberate and intended "to make you believe that everything on this page is wonderful news", although the automation described in the adjoining article was bad news for postmen and postwomen who might be dismissed as a result of the automation project. Other members of the group agreed with this.

Turning to team briefings, they were perceived as having become "one-way" exercises, and "people don't get feedback from the questions they ask". The "cascade" system was not perceived to be working, but was a "game of Chinese whispers" in which subordinate managers failed to pass on information from senior management. A member of the group complained of the lack of communication skills of the managers, and said that managers "would be the first to admit" that they had been given very little training in such skills. The senior representative added:

> I think they've tried with this total quality management, and the notion that it was a business rather than a public service, I think what they've tried to do, they've tried to assume that everybody believes what they think, and everyone has the same mission and values that they have, and of course individuals have different objectives, different values. People come to work for all sorts of different reasons, and you can't assume that everybody comes to work to be a clone of the company.

At a later stage in the meeting, a member referred to the use of briefings by managers in an attempt to dissuade postmen and women from participating in the strikes, selling the deal as "the best thing since sliced bread". This had, however, proved to be counterproductive.

I took up the question of public service versus a business ethos, referring to the June article's attempt through Alan Johnson's words to appeal to postmen and women's idea of public service. I asked, "Do you think that that sort of culture clash is a major factor?" Several members of the group responded immediately saying that this was "fundamental" and had been so for "seven or eight years". It was seen as "another example of the way Royal Mail senior management have drifted away from the realities of the operational floor". In a recent management presentation on "the customer", a participant remarked that "not a single reference was made to the residential customer... It was all about fat-cat customers, business customers that you had to satisfy." The same member contrasted the emphasis in the *Courier* on the postman or woman providing a community service with the company's emphasis on the business customer, seeing the former as a "smokescreen". Another member pointed out that the emphasis on the postman or woman in the community contrasted sharply with the harsh disciplinary action likely to be taken against any worker who was fifteen or twenty minutes late returning from a round because he or she had been doing something in the community. The senior representative said that while the postman or woman had seen the customer as someone to whom they provided a public service, the Royal Mail had "turned the customer into an ideology that

they can use against postmen and postwomen". He instanced the harsh disciplinary action taken against workers who had inadvertently delayed an item of mail. (It was evident, from examples given when I asked the group to explain to me as an outsider how such cases might arise, that they were frequent and the source of considerable anger among postal workers.)

5.5.2 Articles from the *Courier*

I now asked the group to turn their attention to the articles from the June and July 1996 editions of the *Courier*, asking how they tried to dissuade workers from striking. A member responded:

> Well, they're flowering it up, flowering the deal up, trying to make believe that the secretary's on board with Royal Mail, and trying to gloss the better bits of the deal that they see and only briefly going through the advantage points, and not the disadvantages.

I asked how they were trying to show that the general secretary was on board.

The same member responded:

> By having him (*another voice: Putting his picture there...*) Yes, as though it was a cosy...

Another member:

> The quote from him at his own annual conference, which he's addressing as the leader, it's possibly taking some of that out of context, because it's a general speech, taking it very selectively... And they've ended up this article - which they always do - by talking about competition and customers.

He went on to say that this would call to mind "little old ladies", while "what they're really concerned about is the commercial customers". He said that the reference to competition was intended to give the impression that "you were undermining your own job security".

I followed this by saying that in most circumstances a threat of job losses would be a potent threat, and asked why it had not worked in this case. A member

responded that people on the shopfloor were not convinced that competition was as serious as Royal Mail claimed, and that the company retained an effective monopoly position. Another person responded that members decided "even if it were true, it didn't matter, because they were so opposed to what Royal Mail were attempting to do, and because they were so generally fed up with Royal Mail's policies anyway, that they decided even if there was an element of truth in it, it didn't matter." He went on to contrast the claims of loss of business in the articles with Royal Mail's announcements of record profits, and a consequent "credibility gap".

I mentioned the possibility that, if British Gas, for example, decided to take its custom elsewhere, that would have little effect on most postmen since that would represent only one item of correspondence per household on most delivery rounds. They agreed with this, and one member pointed out that some companies which did abandon the Royal Mail during the strikes returned very quickly. Another referred to "glossy videos" which the company had shown, leaving them running in work areas, and trying to press home the same message, as part of "a continuous stream of propaganda". This was seen as "overkill" and counterproductive. The union had learned during the dispute how to communicate, including the need to avoid "doing too much". A postwoman remarked that another reason for the failure of the company's propaganda was the support shown for the postal workers in demonstrations in a "Save the Post Office" campaign, which had shown support from businesses as well as the general public. Another postman remarked that he had found that companies he dealt with were "certainly not abusive or offensive" about the strikes. Postmen and women, he said, had been able to explain to customers what the dispute was about, counteracting adverse impressions from other sources.

I asked if the two articles tried to persuade workers in the same way or in different ways. The initial response, surprisingly, was that they did so in the same way, with no immediate recognition of the very different vocabulary and tone of the two articles. Both were seen as "trying to frighten you" about competition and the threat to jobs. A member pointed out that the June article ended on this note, with the second following on from it. This would seem to indicate that the conciliatory vocabulary of the June article had not been successful, although reference was again made to the attempt to portray the general secretary as being on board. The headline "Let's get it sorted" was connected by at least one member of the group with the threat of competition rather than the appeal to a common interest. One member said he thought "the format of the two articles is quite similar".

A member of the group remarked that Mr Dykes "talked about his employees and about his people as if they were strangers". He continued:

> I mean in the second article - *Closing in for the kill* - he says here - what does he say? - he talks about, yeah: "I am bitterly disappointed that the CWU and its members have resorted to strike action." as if they were someone else, you know, a group of alien people. (*Me: Yes!*) and they're his people.

I acknowledged that this did seem to be the case, and went on to suggest that the strike appeared almost to have a life of its own. I asked what difference the group would make if some extracts from the article had been cast in the form:

> If you go on strike you will undermine the confidence of customers. You will be responsible for customers going out of business.

rather than a form in which the strike appeared as the subject of the verb. A member of the group responded:

> That would personalise it (*Me: Yes, it would.*) because it says you personally now, you're responsible for that, so it's more... I'm not quite sure of the word, it's more global, it globalises the blame doesn't it?

I suggested that the use of the term "the CWU and its members" as if they were separate from the employees in a business with union density of over 90% was deliberate. A member of the group referred to similar usage in local communications, where representations were "taken on board reluctantly, as if you're strangers knocking on the door" rather than part of the organization. The same member continued to say that the substitution of "you" as the agent of the strikes as I had suggested would not have been helpful from the point of view of the Royal Mail, but it would have "become very threatening". He instanced a case of the area manager writing to individuals asking them to "think of the effect on your family if you go on strike". This had proved to be offensive and counterproductive. There was a dichotomy between trying make employees feel they were part of one big family and the use of these threats.

Two members of the group referred to the management's attempts to persuade workers to break the strike, one of them saying that the management attempted to present themselves as being on the same side as the workers, over against the "bogeymen officials". I asked the member to elaborate on this, in the light of the earlier reference to the June article's presentation of the general secretary as being "on board". One member responded:

> I think that they're saying there's a group of people sort of in the middle of the union structure that are the troublemakers.... They're saying that at the top really - the very top, people like Alan Johnson they're quite sensible really and you're ... the thing is I don't think they've ever dared criticize the shopfloor reps like us... after all we see the people every day, but these people in the middle of the organization that are sort of like... they see them as like they're uninvited marriage guidance people who go into the living room of a happy marriage, you know.

Another member continued the "happy marriage" analogy, saying that the management presented middle-ranking union officials as "busybodies interfering and stirring up trouble that isn't there".

I suggested to the group that there were differences in language between the two articles, with the second taking a much more strident line. While conceding this, one member of the group said that what struck him most obviously was that the articles were different not so much from each other as from other issues of the

Courier, in that the two articles appeared to be trying to avoid the jargon and acronyms which normally appeared frequently. He felt that the company had "tried to take on board some of the criticisms, but the trouble is, the end message is no good." He felt that the company had had "some specialist help" in writing the articles, in trying to make them easy to read, although no member of this group questioned the authenticity of quotations as the Liverpool group did, or was so incredulous about attributed authorship as the BT group..

The senior representative acknowledged that the June article did appear to be making an effort to use conciliatory language, but he felt that it was "noticeable that the only time Dykes uses the personal pronoun 'our'" was in relation to customers and competitors. Dykes's terminology, he believed, indicated that he felt ownership of customers and competitors rather than his employees. (By implication, the interviewee appeared to believe that terms such as "our people" were appropriate in reference to subordinates, in contrast with the indifference or hostility to this terminology encountered in BT and GPT, where it was used.) I asked about Dykes's use of the first person, and whether 'we' were the same people throughout the articles. A member responded, "It means different things at different points in the article." Another member felt that Dykes meant "the business and the values it has decided upon" and that Dykes was "making assumptions that we're all aboard, and that we don't particularly want to question what those values mean in terms of our pay and our job security".

I drew attention to specific examples of the first person plural in the June article. I asked first who the group felt Dykes meant by 'us' (represented by 'apostrophe s') in "Let's get it sorted". The senior representative responded, "Well, it's designed to make us feel that it's all of us, but in reality it's the national negotiating team, isn't it?" Some people were unsure just what it meant - at least one of them seeing a play of words on "sorting" as a work activity of postmen -

but another member interpreted it complexly as a request not to go on strike while 'we', the management and national union negotiators, sorted it out, or as an appeal to all of 'us' in the Royal Mail to reach agreement. He wondered whether the ambiguity was deliberate.

I suggested that it seemed pretty clear that the next reference, to getting around the negotiating table, referred to the negotiating teams, and asked the group who they thought Mr Dykes meant in saying, "We recognise that there are concerns about the changes we want to make..." This was recognised as exclusive 'we', referring to the management. I then asked the group what they made of Alan Johnson's use of 'we'. The immediate response was "the national union negotiators", but there was some dissent among the group, largely resolved when it was suggested that Mr Johnson was being "taken out of context - deliberately". The senior representative said that his "emotional" reaction on hearing Mr Johnson say 'we' was that he was speaking on behalf of all members of the union, while he knew that on hearing Mr Dykes say 'we' he was speaking on behalf of a managerial group which was dictating Royal Mail policies disadvantageous to members. Another member said that he felt that in using 'we' Mr Johnson hoped that the view of the workforce and of the national negotiators would be "one and the same". The senior representative saw Mr Dykes as representing "a 'we' that is against us".

I drew attention once again to the earlier reference to a group of bogeymen in the union, and suggested the possibility that Alan Johnson meant himself and the ordinary members over against that group. While acknowledging that there were times in any union where "the king and the peasants" might make common cause against the "barons", members felt it was unlikely that Mr Johnson was seeking to do so in this case. A member referred to the need of the union, unlike the management, to get any potential agreement reached in negotiations ratified. I

reminded members of the earlier remark that Alan Johnson was being quoted out of context, and suggested that more important than who Mr Johnson meant by 'we' was who the author intended readers to think he meant.

I asked why the group thought the articles were cast in the form of interviews rather than as straightforward authored pieces by Mr Dykes. A participant suggested that the latter might have been "too direct, maybe too strident". Another member of the group suggested that it was intended to appear as an "objective report, rather of course it's Royal Mail owns the paper, Royal Mail owns the reporter... Richard Dykes is the Rupert Murdoch of the *Courier*, isn't he?" Another member felt that the article tried to give the impression that "a hungry newshound reporter" was aggressively questioning Mr Dykes "almost like Jeremy Paxman, giving it an air of phoney impartiality".

I drew attention to the use of simpler structures in speech. I asked what the members understood by this use of short sentences and simple vocabulary. A member interjected, "Sort of man of the people..." Another saw this as learning from past experience of the use of jargon and of direct letters from senior managers, which had failed to work. I suggested that the use of speech attributed to Mr Dykes enabled him to use simple language without insulting condescension to "thick postmen", but this met with no more than murmurs of possible assent. The group agreed that whatever Mr Dykes was trying to do, it didn't work. Once again, a member of the group suggested that while "all their ideas for the format might be quite good, ... the message was no good". Another person added "They've confused the medium with the message." He went on to suggest that when the company had arranged the writing and distribution of its message, it thought that the task was finished.

I asked if members of the group had noticed any specific uses of language in the articles, as if intended to influence people. The senior representative suggested that the reference to Royal Mail's having heard people's views was an example of this. He felt that this gave the impression that Royal Mail was on one side of a lake and people on the other shouting across. "They may have heard it, but you don't get a feeling that they've listened." He felt that, "They try to give the impression that they've recognised people's concerns, but it's all very vague."

I then asked if there were any points in the articles where Mr Dykes seemed to contradict himself, in addition to the previously noted contradiction between public service and a business ethos. The first suggestion was that Mr Dykes referred to not being able to win business back, "but later on he seems to say the opposite". I then drew attention to what he said about a strike, pointing to specific paragraphs, to which a member of the group responded:

> He says strike action is pointless, right? And so he means it doesn't have an effect... (*I interject: And then?*) And then it's saying how damaging it is, err, was in France.

The same person returned to the question of winning business back, seeing a contradiction in Mr Dykes's attribution of possible loss of business both to the strike and competition. Arising from this, I asked how valid they felt the argument was that customers might move to other means of communication such as fax or electronic mail. The response was that the development of new methods such as the fax actually increased mail, since a letter was often sent to confirm a message sent by other means. Another participant referred to the use of Mailsort ("what you would call junk mail") in conjunction with television advertising, "so that one complements the other".

The senior representative suggested that other factors in the failure of this argument to convince were that people were "less frightened than they were

seven or eight years ago" and that new technology in any event presented a threat to job security so that the threat in the article was not a significant additional factor in assessment of job security. He went on to raise, unprompted, the promise of job security in the next century, which did not impress "the ordinary postman or woman", who was able to see that this was in reality a very limited promise. There was also dissatisfaction about Royal Mail's failure to exploit new business opportunities and new technology.

Although it had already been touched upon earlier, I asked explicitly if there were any points where the articles were trying to exploit perceived divisions in the union. One of the group mentioned the distinction made between "the CWU and its members" and "employees". Another member said that the impression was that "members and employees are different, but he must know that they're not, so it's deliberate... (*others talking over him*) deliberate, deliberate".

I asked the group to forget what they knew from their own experience, and to pretend that their only knowledge came from the articles, and then asked them to say who, according to the articles, didn't finish negotiations, and who voted for strike action. One member suggested that the mention of the announcement of the strike vote at annual conference implied that it was conference, rather than all members, who had voted for action. They felt that Mr Dykes was implying strongly that the union negotiators had left a meeting that was still in progress and at which progress could still have been made. This clashed strongly with their interpretation of events, in which the actions of the union negotiators were perceived as a failure to agree when deadlock had been reached.

I then asked the group to comment on the words "There are already increasing demands for the monopoly to be removed." A participant felt that the demands were being attributed to "an unspoken outsider", while the managers themselves

were making these demands. The group clearly had an intertextual and contextual understanding of this sentence not available to an outsider, in that the senior management had in the past been outspoken advocates of privatisation of the Royal Mail and of competition. Consequently, they perceived this threat of the removal of the monopoly in the event of a strike, and the implicit presentation of the senior management as defenders of the monopoly, as grossly hypocritical. Indeed, one participant said that, as advocates of privatisation, many of the managers would have been quite happy to have seen Royal Mail work sold off to some of the companies they were now presenting as "competitors". "Nobody has much faith in the Post Office board as a defender of a publicly owned (postal service)".

Although it was not mentioned in the formal interview, a participant later remarked that he believed that most copies of the *Courier* were discarded unread. Indeed, he had advised the CWU against sending union magazines directly to members' home addresses because he believed that a journal with a headline referring to the Royal Mail visible through its transparent wrapping would be assumed to come from the employer and would consequently be thrown away unopened.

5.5.3 The control article

The control article from another employer was the article by Tony Cobbe from GPT Challenge, *It all depends on skill factor*. The initial reaction of the group was extremely favourable, when I asked the group to comment without telling them about the company's industrial relations record, although the senior representative raised some caveats about his lack of knowledge of the company and the general deviousness of managers. The article was seen as giving a "a far better impression of inclusiveness", as in the references to "our people". Another participant contrasted the "threats" of the Royal Mail articles with the

"opportunities" of the GPT piece. The GPT article's emphasis on training also met with approval. The same participant said explicitly that GPT had not said "you'd better get trained or you'll be out of a job", although this was precisely the interpretation placed upon the article by members of GPT focus groups. The senior representative contrasted this piece's stress on cross-functional job moves with Royal Mail's discouragement of such moves. The only notable exception to this generally favourable view was some suspicion about the criticism that "too many of us find (good career management and planning) a chore". This was felt to be an attempt to pass a management task to workers.

5.5.4 Royal Mail focus group - conclusions

As in the other companies, doubt was cast on whether employees read company communications. Once again, I was told that many publications are thrown away without being read or even opened. Another feature common to the other companies was the dissatisfaction with the briefing system in terms of loss of information during the cascade from senior to junior management and of slow or non-existent responses to matters raised by workers with their immediate supervisor at briefings.

In general terms, the participants demonstrated an experientially focused linguistic competence, enabling them to decode company publications, and to interpret other forms of communication, in the light of their experience. Once again, reference and members' resources seemed to be paramount in the process by which they understood their employer's communication with them. The overwhelming view was that Royal Mail had so far "lost touch with its employees" that its attempts to communicate were likely to fail. The employer was believed to be placing an unrealistically optimistic gloss upon changes which were not in the interest of its employees, and to be employing language which was not that of its workers. As anticipated, the clash between the public service

ethos of the workforce and the business-oriented approach of management was readily detected in the company's communication. The participants felt much of the employer's communication to be counterproductive, especially in the context of the strikes in 1996. This was exacerbated by what the participants called "overkill", in the form of excessive amounts of communication.

Some specific aspects of language were perceived immediately, and explicitly understood as an attempt to manipulate workers' opinion, most obviously, the use of 'we' to encourage belief in the Royal Mail as a "happy family". This immediately clashed with the participants' experience of working for the company. Indeed, so suspicious were the participants of the use of 'we' that they appeared to interpret usages such as "our customers", which I had assumed to be inclusive, as exclusive 'we' referring to Royal Mail management. The attempt at inclusiveness has failed.

The ideological use of "the customer" was also perceived at the surface level, and rejected by members of the group because of their understanding of the customer as the residential recipient of mail, while the company was seen to be interested in the "fat cat" commercial sender of mail. This may perhaps in part account for the interpretation of "our" as exclusive when applied to "customers". The participants were perhaps contrasting 'our', the management's, "fat cat" customers with their residential customers. The linguistic concept of reference is clearly important here, in that the postmen and women rejected the (commercially more accurate) concept of the sender, who had paid the cost of postage, as "customer" in favour of the residential recipient whom they met daily.

The attempt to distinguish "the CWU and its members" from "employees" was also readily understood by the participants, and felt to be insultingly treating the union as "a group of alien people". Indeed, the group showed a sophisticated

understanding of what they perceived as attempts to divide and rule. They had, without prompting, instanced the attempt by the June article to depict the general secretary as being "on board", and had later accused the company of trying to depict union officials as "bogeymen". When asked to justify this apparent contradiction, they had readily done so by defining the "bogeymen" as a group of officials at an intermediate level in the union's hierarchy whom the company had been trying to contrast with the "sensible" general secretary.

The internal contradiction of the portrayal of strike action as both useless and devastating was easily recognised, as was the limitation of a promise of job security into the next century issued in 1996. The implication that the union negotiators had left a meeting while further progress was possible was understood and rejected. One member of the group suggested that the mention of the announcement of the vote for action at conference was intended to imply falsely that the decision had been taken there. These perceived attempts to foment or exploit internal divisions in the union caused considerable anger in the group.

In some cases, the members of the group brought to their understanding contextual and intertextual knowledge which would not readily be available even to an outsider with knowledge of industrial relations practice. For example, the use of a threat to the Royal Mail's monopoly was seen as crassly hypocritical in the light of senior managers' support for competition and privatisation. The greatest paradox of the focus group interview was that members did not notice initially any difference in the way in which the two articles sought to dissuade employees from striking. The conciliatory language of the June article hardly seemed to be noticed; instead, it was construed as a "threat", continued in the July article. This could in part be explained as the result of an intertextual reading, in which the lack of technical terminology in the two articles meant that

they were more different from other issues of the *Courier* than they were from each other. The industrial relations context also perhaps influenced interpretation. The frequent references to a strike in the June article may well also have played a part in undermining the attempt at conciliatory language elsewhere in the article. In any event, this did not work to the company's advantage, since the participants had not been persuaded that they shared a common interest with the company.

The participants' remarks about the use of the interview format are interesting in the light of Connell's discerning (1994) a move towards a neutral reporting style. On the basis of this group's comments, contemptuously dismissing any idea that a reporter "owned" by the company can engage in robust questioning of the managing director, it would seem that workers will not easily be persuaded that such a neutral approach is possible in a company publication.

The group's favourable reading of the article from GPT Challenge perhaps further emphasises the importance of reference and context in the interpretation of a piece of management communication. Even devices which they had immediately understood as manipulative or intended to deceive in Royal Mail's communication passed unremarked, and the piece was read as an unqualified commitment to training by GPT, with only one member of the group, the senior representative, qualifying his favourable remarks with any caveats. (A possibility not explored at the interview was that the members of the group may have thought that the passage was deliberately included as a contrasting "good" item of management communication.)

Chapter 6 Case Study 3 - BT

6.1 Context - the company and its communication

BT, as noted in Chapter 3, is the largest private sector company in the UK, and is GPT's main domestic customer. Despite the company's boasts of a move towards electronic means of communication with employees, cited by Connell (1994), BT continues to make heavy use of magazines and other means of written communication. In 1996, the internal lay trade union officials in the company's Birmingham offices did not have access to BT's web site. Indeed, a curiosity of this company is that a disgruntled business customer has set up a web site using "british-telecom" as part of its name, perhaps an unforeseen result of the company's desire to use BT as its official name and consequent failure to use the longer name in its URL. The company was producing at least eight publications in 1996, ranging from company-wide magazines to a temporary publication dealing with an office move in Birmingham due to be completed in early 1997. However, the document I have chosen to discuss here is not an article from these publications but a letter from the managing director of one of BT's business groups, Networks and Systems, the text of which is given below..

6.2 BT - industrial relations and employee involvement

In addition to drawing upon press coverage and documents supplied, I carried out two interviews with J, a CWU official, the first being a preliminary meeting at which he supplied me with examples of company and union communications. The second meeting was the full discussion recounted below.

6.2.1 Union organization

J is a lay representative, subject to annual election, representing about 1000 technical employees of BT. CWU is recognised to represent this grade, as also a "very small" number of manual employees and some 700 clerical workers. The latter are organized in a separate branch, covering the Black Country as well as

Birmingham, and thus this figure includes clerical workers in areas additional to those covered by J's branch, which broadly corresponded with the Birmingham (0121) dialling code area. Managers were represented by the Society of Telecommunications Executives (although some had been promoted above the level at which the STE had representational rights). J was unsure of the precise number of managers, but it seemed possible to extrapolate a figure of about 60-70 managers for the Birmingham area. It was possible that the Communications Managers Association retained a small membership within the company. J was unable to give an estimate for the union density in grades represented by the STE, although he "suspected it was fairly high", but he estimated CWU membership at 97% or more in technical grades and at about 75-80% in clerical grades.

The main change observed by J over the last five years had been the "massive" reduction in staffing levels - close to 50% in his grade, although BT remained the biggest private sector employer in the UK. This had had a "significant effect on the confidence of the vast majority of members". Job security was "evaporating, and people were less inclined to put their heads up above the parapet". An additional organising difficulty was the isolation of many members who worked alone, being based at home rather than coming to an office daily. (This probably accounted for 40-50% of the membership of J's branch.)

6.2.2 Employee involvement

Downward communication

Company newspaper

This had been discussed in a preliminary meeting with J at which I had been supplied with copies of eight company publications. The company continued to produce several publications at national level and also on a geographical and business group basis. They were produced by internal journalists. J believed that

these written media were of high quality. Circulation was efficient, with publications going to employees' home addresses or to their duty locations, but still addressed to individual employees by name, rather than being left in offices for employees to pick up or ignore.

He believed that employees found these publications "useful as far as they go" but that, as with any newspaper, "you shouldn't bank on the information in there. All the documents are biased towards a particular view of the company; they all talk up everything that's going on. There's very little criticism in them at all." What criticism did exist was questions raised in team meetings or readers' letters, but those printed tended to be those to which a reply could fairly easily be given.

Company videos

These had been in use since about the middle-late 1980s. They were used from time to time when major changes were introduced. J was unimpressed with their quality, describing them as "appalling". Further questioning elicited that he based this opinion on their "talking head" nature, as "an opportunity to display a board member". The videos were shown at team meetings, with an opportunity to raise questions. These were, however, rarely answered. J believed that shop stewards and workers were "by and large unimpressed" by the videos.

Employee report

An abridged version of the annual report and accounts was circulated to the home addresses of employees. It made little impression and was not widely discussed among the workforce. The major exception was issues relating to regulation of the telecommunications industry, which employees believed could have an effect on job security.

Briefing system

A briefing system had been in place since the mid-1980s. Holding of sessions was mandatory for managers, with failure to hold briefings adversely affecting their bonus. Briefs were normally carried out by the first line manager, or occasionally by the second tier. Only rarely would the third tier manager be involved. (Managers at increasing levels of seniority in the company were normally called "Tier 1", "Tier 2" and so on.)

Briefings were very much a local matter, although some "cascade" briefs were used for important company-wide announcements. There was no formal trade union presence in briefings; indeed, the union had decided not to participate, a decision which J thought with hindsight to have been a mistake. Workers' opinions of the briefing system varied "enormously" depending on the manager giving the brief. In part this arose from a desire to help a popular manager, since his bonus could depend on the briefing, and it also depended on how much employees thought their manager could do for them about issues raised in the briefing.

Trade union response

Because of the dispersed nature of the workforce, section meetings were rarely viable and mass meetings difficult to organize. The union used leaflets and newsletters to communicate with members. It had sent two direct mailings a year to members' home addresses, and planned to increase this to four a year. Ad hoc communication was also used in response to particular issues. Fax and internal mail were used to communicate with activists who would then cascade information to colleagues. The union was seeking to negotiate access to the company's internal e-mail system.

Although the union's national newspaper, the *Voice*, was highly regarded by journalists and had been recognised by an award as the best union newspaper, it

made little impression on members. J instanced cases of issues which had been prominently featured as front-page news in the *Voice* without members apparently noticing them.

Upward problem solving

Suggestion scheme

A scheme existed. It was controlled nationally, with payment for useful suggestions.

Attitude survey

There was an annual attitude survey of all employees (the "Care Survey"). Complaints were of the lack of feedback and the partial publication of results. Employees, in J's opinion, participated quite enthusiastically in the survey. To some extent, like team briefings, this reflected a wish not to affect adversely the pay of a popular manager. There was also a hope (misplaced in J's view) that the company might act positively to address the matters raised in the survey.

Quality circles

These existed in theory, but were not widespread and employee participation was "very low". They were perceived to have been fashionable around the turn of the decade but now to have gone out of fashion. The union was officially opposed to quality circles.

Total quality management

This had also been a fad at the turn of the decade, with much attention to BS5750 and ISO9000, but now appeared to be much less important. Most members, in J's view, "hated TQM" and found the attendant paperwork "cumbersome and intensely boring".

Financial employee involvement

Individual bonuses existed for managers and a small number of clerical staff (in sales and billing for major business customers), but not for technical and manual workers. Performance related pay was restricted to managers and a small, specialised group of clerical workers. Free shares were distributed to workers, this being the only form of profit-sharing in use, and a share purchase scheme also existed.

J felt that share ownership had not had a significant effect on workers' attitudes and believed that most workers sold their free shares as soon as they could do so without incurring tax.

Representative participation

Works council

A works council under European Union provisions existed at national level. Employee representation was elected through the trade unions.

Collective bargaining

This existed at branch, zone and national level. Pay and key conditions were negotiated nationally; staffing levels and similar issues at zone level, and grievances, discipline and local health and safety issues at branch level. In J's opinion, the introduction of new forms of employee involvement had had little effect on collective bargaining. Union material produced at branch level appeared to be believed more readily by employees than the company's publications, although the latter were much "glossier". Staff "don't tend to be trustful of their managers".

Change programme

This had existed since the late 1980s, with the issuing of a mission statement and set of values, with the aim to become "toptelco" (top telecommunications company in the world) initially by 1990.

6.3 The letter

Letter from Chris Earnshaw, Managing Director of BT Networks and Systems (3 May 1996)

To: All people in Networks and Systems

Dear Colleague,

Making Change an Opportunity - Workwise

Networks and Systems is a major success story since the launch just 12 months ago. Service provision has improved and network faults have fallen. Innovative services such as Callminder and the next generation BT Chargecard have been introduced. Market leading interactive multimedia services are being successfully trialled in East Anglia and we are developing plans for the wider deployment of broadband technology. This has been achieved through the skill, professionalism, teamwork and commitment of N & S people, and is something of which we can all be proud. Thank you for your contribution to this success, which is recognised by our customers.

In the telecommunications and information systems business, nothing stays the same for very long. Competition is hotting up, the regulatory environment is more challenging and technological advances are accelerating. To remain successful, we face some difficult decisions. In building our plans for the coming year we have taken into account the longer term trends in the industry. We have balanced customer demand for service with the competitive pressure to continue to cut our prices and hence our costs to their lowest practical level. We can take advantage of technological advances, rationalisation and market changes in order to deliver what the business needs more effectively.

New jobs will emerge and some jobs will go over the next twelve months. The reductions will be partially met as people leave N&S before September 1996, under the Release 95 Scheme. By balancing limited recruitment with natural wastage, reducing wherever practical our spend on overtime, agency and contract labour, and actively helping our people to reskill, we intend to minimise the need for further voluntary redundancy. Building on our successes in 1995/96, when over 1,000 people were deployed into new jobs within BT, we are working hard to create reskilling programmes to enable those people whose jobs are affected to

develop new skills and competences. This will make it easier for them to find a new job, either in another part of BT or outside the Company.

N&S is a big organisation (64,000) and the planned changes will impact on specific parts of it. The vast majority of our people will be unaffected. The N&S Board is now identifying the areas where jobs will be reduced; your Director will be writing to you shortly about the plans for your directorate, and how they will be achieved.

I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you, we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy, before the year end. BT/N&S of course will make the final decision on whether or not to progress the enquiry. Further details on this will be publicised in due course, but I must stress that we can give no guarantees. The big difference with our new approach is that the on-going job losses will occur at different times during the year and will be specific to particular departments/units, skills/work areas and tasks/activities. In our search to help the people affected, no opportunity will be overlooked to find alternative employment and general requests for redundancy could create such openings.

We face some exciting but tough challenges in the coming 12 months, and I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring approach to our people, helping everyone in Networks and Systems to make change an opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

E1. Content

The letter, addressed to all of Mr Earnshaw's subordinates, begins with a paragraph claiming that the Networks and Systems business group has been successful and thanking employees for their contribution. However, the second paragraph informs the reader, change is necessary. The third paragraph goes on to say that this will entail the elimination of some jobs, but that the company will make efforts to "minimise the need for further voluntary redundancy". The fourth paragraph says that most people will be unaffected, but that further information will follow about areas where jobs will be reduced. The fifth invites volunteers for redundancy, claiming that this arises from "feedback from a number of you", but giving no undertaking that they will be accepted, and promises efforts to

redeploy those wishing to stay with the company. The final paragraph returns to the enthusiasm of the first with promises of "a constructive and caring approach".

E2. Non-linguistic features

These are not significant in this item. It is a word-processed letter, printed on the company's headed notepaper. The title line appears as shown above, in a slightly larger type, italicised and underlined. No other use is made of non-linguistic features.

E3. Vocabulary

The letter shares with the article by Mr Cobbe a general business vocabulary, with references to "customers" and such features as the use of nouns as verbs ("trialled") and vice versa ("our spend"), the use of "challenge" in preference to "problem", and complex adjectival groups ("market leading interactive multimedia services"). Again like Mr Cobbe, Mr Earnshaw refers to his subordinates as "people" or "our people". The letter is directed to "All people in Networks and Systems", and this appears from the company's publication to be its preferred way of referring to its employees. Some use is made of the technical vocabulary of the telecommunications industry.

As the content varies from paragraph to paragraph, so Mr Earnshaw draws on different aspects of the business lexicon. The opening paragraph describes "a major success story" and draws upon a lexicon of success: "improved"; "faults have fallen"; "innovative... next generation"; "skill, professionalism, teamwork and commitment... we can be proud"; "Thank you for your contribution to this success..."

The second paragraph draws upon a lexicon of the need for change: "nothing stays the same for very long"; "Competition is hotting up... more challenging and advances are accelerating"; "longer term trends..."; "competitive pressure".

In the third paragraph, Mr Earnshaw mentions job reductions. He is at pains to present this in as positive a light as possible. He speaks of "minimising the need for further voluntary redundancy". This terminology is interesting in that it implies that there will be no compulsory redundancy, while avoiding any promise that this will be the case. (The fifth paragraph may well indicate that he is correct in assuming that there will be no need for compulsory redundancy.) He briefly returns to the lexicon of success, this time in connection with the company's previous "successes ... when over 1,000 people were deployed into jobs within BT" and saying that the company is "creating reskilling programmes". This vocabulary creates a tone of relentless optimism, the effect of which upon its intended audience would, I hypothesised, depend on their experience of previous redeployment exercises. The brief fourth paragraph continues this theme of reassurance about the changes which will not affect the majority of employees.

The fifth paragraph turns to the possibility of voluntary redundancy. It begins:

> I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you, we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy, before the year end.

This sentence attributes the idea of redundancy to "a number of you" who had raised the matter in "feedback". The number, which could in theory be any number of employees from one to 64,000, is undisclosed, nor does Mr Earnshaw's letter reveal the matter on which this feedback was given. The opening words "I should mention" are commonly used to introduce an afterthought, or something which purports to be an afterthought. The effect of the sentence up to the second comma is to claim that volunteering for redundancy hadn't crossed the company's mind until some employees asked about it. The last few words, "before the year end", imply that voluntary redundancy must be grasped while it is still on offer. The remainder of the paragraph, with its

emphasis on the fact that the company cannot promise to accept volunteers, could also be construed as urging haste in coming forward, in order to improve the chance of acceptance. This may well indicate that Mr Earnshaw's implicit optimism earlier in his letter is justified, and that compulsory redundancies would be extremely unlikely.

The final paragraph returns again to the enthusiastic business vocabulary of the first two paragraphs, placing a positive light upon change and recapitulating in the final words of the letter its title "helping everyone ... to make change an opportunity".

E4. Pronouns

Given that this is a signed letter, Mr Earnshaw makes very limited use of the first person singular, which appears only three times, its use being confined to the last two paragraphs:

> I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you, we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy, before the year end.
> ... I must stress that we can give no guarantees (that volunteers for redundancy will be accepted)
> ... I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring approach to our people...

In each case, there is a strong modality - of obligation in the first two instances, and of truth in the third - which is applied to actions to be undertaken (or not undertaken in the case of giving guarantees) by 'us', the management. In each case, Mr Earnshaw's apparent intention is to stamp his own authority on the actions of management. This runs the risk of a less charitable interpretation, which did in fact emerge in the focus group, that the writer only undertakes an obligation to transfer it immediately to 'us'.

'You/your' appears in three sentences:

> Thank you for your contribution to this success, which is recognised by our customers.
> ... your Director will be writing to you shortly about the plans for your directorate, and how they will be achieved
> I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you, we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy, before the year end.

The last instance, where 'you' is being used in the plural, as if to address the workforce in general, has already been discussed. In the other instances, the pronoun appears to be used in the singular, addressed to the recipient of the individual letter.

'We/us/our' appears twenty-two times, and is found in every paragraph. In most cases, it seems clear that the usage is exclusive - 'we, the management' - most obviously when it used in relation to the company's intention to reduce the need for redundancy to a minimum and make efforts to redeploy or retrain employees. The exclusive use appears throughout paragraphs three to five. Inclusive 'we', management and workers together, is the obvious subject of "we can all be proud". It is probably the subject of

> To remain successful, we face some difficult decisions.

and possibly of

> We can take advantage of technological advances, rationalisation and market changes in order to deliver what the business needs more effectively.

However, some usages are more problematic, for example:

> We face some exciting but tough challenges in the coming 12 months, and I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring attitude to our people...

Here, the first use of 'we' appears to be inclusive, but the second use must be exclusive - 'we, the management'. The occurrence of the two uses in a single sentence is particularly striking, but the mingling of apparently inclusive and

exclusive uses is frequent in the first two paragraphs and the last. This is potentially mystificatory.

E5. Transformation and the verb

Some use of the passive transformation is made in this letter. Of eleven uses, two, in successive sentences, have an expressly stated agent:

> This has been achieved through the skill, professionalism, teamwork and commitment of N & S people, and is something of which we can all be proud. Thank you for your contribution to this success which is recognised by our customers.

It could be argued that two uses of the agentless passive disguise responsibility for managerial actions:

> ... jobs will be reduced...
> (Plans) ... will be achieved ...

However, the letter also contains examples of the use of the agentless passive where Mr Earnshaw might reasonably have used 'we, the management' to claim responsibility for its caring attitude:

> ... over 1,000 people were deployed into jobs within BT ...
> ... no opportunity will be overlooked ...

It would be difficult on balance to argue that the passive transformation plays an unequivocal ideological role in this piece.

There are more than thirty examples of nominalization in the letter. The second paragraph, telling employees that "nothing stays the same for long" attributes the need for "change" (itself a nominalization) to "competition", the "regulatory environment" and "technological advances". The third paragraph, containing the bad news that there will be some job reductions, contains six examples of nominalization (including "reductions" itself). Mr Earnshaw hopes to reduce the

"need" for voluntary redundancies by "limited recruitment" and "natural wastage". The effect of these nominalizations is to distance the potential redundancies from management decisions. Paragraph 5, discussing the proposals for dealing with volunteers for redundancy, contains two curious examples of nominalizations re-transformed into verbs by the use of another verb as an "auxiliary":

> BT/N&S of course will *make* the final *decision*...
> ... I must stress that we *can give* no *guarantees*.

This may avoid the abruptness of

> We (the management) will decide who goes.
> We can guarantee nothing.

An interesting feature of this letter is the concentration of non-finite verbs in the second and third paragraphs. When "modal + infinitive" constructions like "can give" are excluded, there are sixteen non-finite verbs in the letter. Of these, five are found in the second paragraph, outlining the difficulty facing the company, and nine in the third paragraph, giving the bad news of possible redundancies. The use of these forms, which do not require a subject, may act like the agentless passive in removing responsibility for the actions.

E6. Transitivity

The most notable feature of this letter is the frequency with which processes and other inanimate forces appear as the subject of finite verbs.

Human agents appear eighteen times as subjects, and once as the expressed agent of a passive verb. Of these occurrences thirteen are 'we', often serving as the subject of verbs of mental process, such as "are developing plans", "can be proud", "face some difficult decisions". 'We, the management' appears as the

subject of clauses indicating that 'we' propose some action for the benefit of the workforce:

> ... we intend to minimise the need for further voluntary redundancy ...
> ... we are working hard to create reskilling programmes ...
> ... we will maintain a constructive and caring approach to our people ...

Mr Earnshaw's three references to himself in the first person have been discussed in section E4, above. The remaining human subjects are "the majority of our people" and "your Director", and "our customers" appear as the agent of a passive.

Institutions (always "Networks and Systems" or some synonym) appear four times:

> Networks and Systems is a major success story...
> N&S is a big organisation...
> The N&S Board is now identifying the areas where jobs will be reduced....
> BT/N&S of course will make the final decision (whether to accept a volunteer for redundancy)

It is noteworthy that N&S is only connected tangentially with the declaration of redundancies, deciding where the job reductions will be and which volunteers may go, but not being credited with responsibility for deciding that there should be redundancies.

However, there are 23 instances of an abstraction appearing as the subject of a finite verb. Indeed, in a few sentences, the same abstraction is the subject of two verbs, as for example the use of indeterminate 'this' referring back to the previous sentence:

> This has been achieved ... and is something of which we can all be proud.

It may be significant that the abstractions vary from paragraph to paragraph. In the first paragraph, proclaiming the company's success, the abstractions are technical events - "service provision", "network faults", "market leading multimedia services" - and "success" itself. In the second, which attributes blame for the changes which have led to the need for job reductions, "nothing" stays the same, and "competition", the "regulatory environment" and "technological advances" are named as being responsible for the problems, or "challenges", which the company faces.

In the third paragraph, finite verbs are few. (See previous section.) The opening sentences have "new jobs", "some jobs" and "reductions" as the subjects of finite verbs. As Mr Earnshaw moves on to outline the company's plans to reduce the impact of the possible redundancies, managerial 'we' becomes the subject. Finally, indeterminate 'this', referring to the penultimate sentence, is the subject of the last sentence of the paragraph. This paragraph and the preceding one demonstrate a sort of grammatical cherry-picking, in which 'we, the management' claim credit for attempts to alleviate a situation which is blamed on inanimate forces.

This approach continues to some extent in paragraph 5, where managerial 'we' or Mr Earnshaw, as 'I', responds to "feedback from a number of you" indicating that some people would welcome voluntary redundancy. As detailed above, this effectively claims managerial prerogative in deciding who should be released. In the second half of the paragraph, abstractions once again predominate, this time in defence of this prerogative: "further details", "the big difference with our new approach", "on-going job losses", "no opportunity", "general requests for redundancy".

I suggest that this heavy use of abstract forces as the subjects of finite verbs is ideologically very significant, and that it tends to distance management from responsibility for the redundancies.

E7. Modality

The letter demonstrates a rich mixture of modalities. As with other linguistic features, modality varies from paragraph to paragraph of this text.

The modality of **truth** is present implicitly to some degree throughout the text. It is perhaps most clearly present in the claims of successes in the opening paragraph and the assertions of the need for change in the second paragraph. In both cases, statements of fact, implicitly claiming truth, follow one another in rapid succession.

The modality of **desirability,** as might be expected, is found in the title "Making Change an Opportunity", the opening paragraph about the "major success story", and in the closing paragraph's return to enthusiasm about "exciting but tough challenges" and its reprise of "to make change an opportunity". More surprisingly, perhaps, it is found to some extent in the "bad news" of paragraph 3, which sees previous redeployment in terms of "successes".

Permission appears unequivocally in the first paragraph, where Mr Earnshaw gives permission to 'us all' to be proud. This modality makes a much more ambiguous appearance in the fourth paragraph, where Mr Earnshaw gives permission to enquire about redundancy, heavily qualified with provisos that "BT/N&S will of course make the final decision on whether or not to progress the enquiry" and that "we can give no guarantees".

The modality of **obligation** appears in paragraphs 2, 3, 5 and 6. In paragraphs 2 and 3, the modality is used primarily to present the proposed job reductions as being imposed upon the company. Thus, "we face some difficult decisions" as a result of "customer demand for service" and "competitive pressure" to "deliver what the business needs". There is a perceived "need for further voluntary redundancy". Obligation of a different kind is implicit in Mr Earnshaw's declaration that the company is "working hard" to alleviate this. In these paragraphs, the modality of obligation is being used, as is often the case in redundancy announcements, to distance management from responsibility for the decision to reduce jobs by presenting the redundancies as something "we have to" do.

In the last two paragraphs, one example of this modality implicitly accepts an obligation "to help the people affected", when Mr Earnshaw says that "no opportunity will be overlooked to do so". Elsewhere, Mr Earnshaw accepts personal obligation:

> I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy...
> ... I must stress that we can give no guarantees ...
> ... I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring approach...

However, as discussed above, the first example seems designed to transfer responsibility for the idea of redundancy to potential volunteers who had enquired. The second uses the modality in what is almost a "double negative". Mr Earnshaw is obliged (by some unstated person or force) to stress that 'we, the management' are obliged not to give guarantees. Effectively, the modality of obligation is being used by Mr Earnshaw to distance himself and his management team from a decision not to accept all comers, or to permit voluntary redundancy on a "first come, first accepted" basis, but to choose who is

permitted to leave. The third obligation, undertaken by Mr Earnshaw's determination to "maintain a constructive and caring approach" promises no specific action, and could be construed as warm words with little meaning.

E8. General conclusions

This letter is marked by distinct changes of subject matter, vocabulary, transitivity and modality from paragraph to paragraph. These may reflect the contradictions inherent in a communication of possible redundancies. Since the document will be sent to all employees, it must seek to maintain morale among the majority who will not be dismissed or redeployed. At the same time, it must try to reassure recipients whose jobs are at risk - and who may well know this to be the case on the basis of workload, previous business decisions, or the "grapevine" - that the company will use its best endeavours to redeploy them.

A further inherent contradiction underlying several of these linguistic devices, and perhaps especially the modality of obligation, is that Mr Earnshaw wishes to retain the confidence of his subordinates that he and his management team are in control of the situation, while distancing themselves from the decision to reduce the number of jobs in the Network and Systems division. Thus responsibility for the possible redundancies is attributed to inanimate forces. When Mr Earnshaw himself accepts responsibility by saying that he "must" or "should" do something, this is either qualified by attributing the obligation to other forces or people, including "feedback" from potential volunteers for redundancy, or the obligation accepted is to an unspecific "constructive and caring approach".

6.4 BT focus group

The five members of this group were all members of the committee of a large CWU branch representing BT technical employees. Involvement in workplace union activity varied, with the senior lay official J being one of the group, while one member was retired. All were men, reflecting the predominantly male workforce in technical grades within the company. (The senior representative was aware of only about twenty women in a branch membership of more than a thousand.) Three members of the group worked in the Networks & Systems division, of which Mr Earnshaw was managing director.

Unlike other groups, where the material for discussion had been sent to participants several days in advance, the participants had in this case only seen the letter from Chris Earnshaw and the control article a few minutes before the meeting began. This arose because the meeting was arranged at short notice. The session was affected by technical problems with recording, and for the earlier part of the meeting the description below relies upon a forensic transcription of a poor quality recording.

6.4.1 Communication in general

I began as usual by inviting general comments. However, a participant who did not work for N&S began by asking immediately about the letter, asking whether it was an individual letter sent to people's homes, a letter distributed by managers, or an article in a magazine. It was confirmed that it was sent to people's homes. A participant remarked, to assent from colleagues, "I can assure you we get that much information on glossies in our place that they go straight in the bin." He went on to complain of a surfeit of information, comparing the glossy magazines with information to shareholders. Another participant said that material arriving at people's homes in a BT envelope was also likely to be construed as "junk mail" and discarded unread, unless employees knew that there

was "something going on" in the company. Another participant also complained of an excess of information, saying, "You get that much information that you're flooded with it now." He compared this situation unfavourably with "the days when we got very little information but perhaps what you did get was important".

This complaint of excessive information, and the claim that much of it was discarded unread, was common to all the companies. However, the claim that even individual letters about potential redundancies, sent to employees' homes remained unread seemed surprising, and I took the opportunity when the flow of discussion permitted to enquire further about this. An additional point raised was that the optimistic opening paragraph could have encouraged people to read no further. One participant envisaged the possibility of subsequent exaggerated rumours followed by frantic searching in bins to find the discarded letter. Another person suggested that by 1996, after four years of job reductions, employees were inured to redundancy announcements. Some employees were quite keen to volunteer for redundancy on BT's relatively generous terms. It may be the case that the apparent unconcern which would allow employees to discard the letter stemmed from the absence of compulsory redundancy.

A participant said that he felt many managers "took the same courses as George Orwell", accusing the company's communication of being "full of doublespeak". This was the only group in which participants referred specifically to Japanization, with a participant remarking that "just reading through it (Earnshaw's letter) it strikes me that he must sort of at some time taken a holiday in Tokyo and he hasn't really understood the Japanese system". Later in the meeting, another participant remarked of a manager who had tried to "involve" his subordinates, "That's another jargon word - 'involving' everyone. He was part of American/ Japanese culture - TQM - Total Quality Management."

Turning to team briefings, the participants once again made the complaint raised in the other companies of tardy, insufficient or non-existent feedback - "If I need to have information I don't need to wait another month (for it)". Another participant referred to a two-month delay in responses, and a third mentioned that responses related only to less important matters. The retired participant recounted that team briefings had begun a few years before he left the company, and that:

> it was necessary for the first line supervisor to actually insist that people attended; otherwise he would have been sitting there on his own. I mean we didn't find them of any use. They were certainly of no value to the staff.

When asked if people tried to use the team briefings for their own purposes or to sabotage them, the same participant said, "Team briefings fall into the same category as (trade union) branch meetings. People are very apathetic." He also referred to employees who "just went along because they had to and they sat there and said nothing and came away." In contrast with the situation in GPT Liverpool, one participant reported that colleagues found the meetings so boring that they preferred to find urgent work which required them to absent themselves from the team briefings.

Members of the group added that there was some reluctance to raise matters in team briefings because of adverse effects upon their appraisals and promotion prospects if they were regarded as "awkward". A particular problem was reported around circuit records, an aspect of the technical work described as "appalling" (because the work is time-consuming and tedious). A member who had sought to volunteer improvements in the handling of this work had been "warned off" because it could affect relations between the provisioning and maintenance departments. However, the participants acknowledged that some people had learned how to use the system to score well on appraisals.

There was some general cynicism around promotion in the company, with a remark that to be promoted to management "you had to be really good or really awful". Competent employees in the middle range were, the participants believed, too valuable in their present job to be promoted. While the claims of the "high flyer" had to be acknowledged, there was also a view that some less competent employees were effectively "kicked upstairs" to a managerial position in which they could do no harm. At a later point in the meeting, similar dissatisfaction was voiced about the company's policy regarding redundancy. Participants felt that the company was too quick to respond to City demands for headcount reduction, and was releasing employees whose skills it really needed to retain. These demands seemed to be considered at least as important as technical change in spurring redundancy, and consequently the participants were not convinced by Mr Earnshaw's attribution of change to technical progress.

Team leaders were seen as "not part of the team", and in fact the term was not normally used, and might not be understood. Participants said that "gaffer" or "Tier 1" (term used in the company for the lowest level of supervision) were more common.

Initiatives like TQM were seen by the participants to come into fashion and then disappear:

> I think most people in BT had to go on a half... - no, a day, surely it was in those days discussing TQM and involving everyone. Like everything in BT it's rolled out with a great fanfare and just seems to die.

This appears to give evidence in support of Huczynski's suggestion (1993) that there is a "succession of management fads" and to reinforce Connell's scepticism (1994) about the existence of an overarching managerial plan. Other participants described with hilarity the role-playing on these courses, with one employee acting as manager, another as lavatory cleaner, and so on.

6.4.2 The letter from Chris Earnshaw

I now asked the group to give specific attention to the letter, asking what they felt Mr Earnshaw was trying to do. There was an immediate recognition of differences between the paragraphs:

> The first paragraph, first of all self-esteem... The second paragraphs tries to lead you to the fact that they're going to sack you, which they're not going to do at the moment... And the third paragraph suggests that they don't need (*rest of remark inaudible*)

Another participant perceived the first paragraph as a "pat on the back". The retired member felt that:

> He's looking after his own job, but he seems to sort of be buoying you up in the initial part of it, giving some sort of warning in the middle, and then coming round to the nitty gritty that he's going to get rid of a few people at the end.

Another employee added:

> Overall I think that he'd want to say that we're going to do this, we're going to get rid of loads of people. If you keep your nose clean then you'll be all right.

The retired member said that he would be "very interested to compare that with the letter that has been sent out by Branson to the people in Virgin Trains" (which was making redundancies at the time of the interview).

I asked if the participants noticed any particular features of vocabulary that were different from everyday English. A member suggested that it was "very wordy", and it was later suggested that this prolixity might have originated in BT's public sector days as a "Civil Service" style. One member felt that it would have been possible to "say the same thing with a quarter of the words".

Interestingly, in the course of this discussion, it was suggested by some participants that Mr Earnshaw was not the author of the piece - a possibility not

raised by the participants in the GPT groups when discussing the article attributed to Tony Cobbe. It was felt that the letter originated in the company's personnel function. Disbelief in Mr Earnshaw's authorship surfaced again towards the end of the interview.

The letter was seen as trying to "build you up as part of the company" before saying, "You know you're doing a great job. Will you now volunteer to lose it to further the interests of the company?" There was some division among the group about when they first realised in reading the letter that it referred to potential job reductions. One person said that it was only in the last paragraph, but for others, the turning point was "to remain successful we face some difficult decisions". I asked specifically why participants felt that Mr Earnshaw began a letter announcing job reductions with a paragraph about the business as a "major success story". It was seen as "softening you up", "a routine build-up". One participant suggested that "the bloke who wrote it for Earnshaw is probably now writing for the Conservative Party". However, one participant said:

> Yeah, but to be fair, don't we all do this in standard English when we're writing letters (*Me: Carry on.*) Isn't this the sort of thing you're taught at school. You say, well, "Thank you very much, but...."

It was seen as a standard way of "conveying bad news".

I asked the group how they would know from the letter whether the redundancies were to be compulsory or voluntary. The immediate response was "Well, he doesn't say." (Some of the ensuing conversation was inaudible.) Another participant added that he "read it as it would be voluntary". One member interpreted the letter as saying that "if you volunteer, you're out" and another said that he would not find the letter very reassuring if he were concerned about his job security.

When I asked whose idea it was, according to the letter, that there might be voluntary redundancies, the immediate response was, "Well, they're trying to make it your idea." When I then asked how the letter did this, the participants identified the phrase "in response to feedback from a number of you". A participant added that previous experience had shown that when voluntary redundancy was offered people rushed to accept. Mr Earnshaw's treatment of the question, and his inability to promise acceptance of volunteers, was construed variously as a half-promise, as trying to encourage movement within the company in order to avoid redundancy, and as arising from problems of skill shortages which could be exacerbated if the "wrong" people volunteered. A participant instanced the difficulty of persuading people to work in Walsall, and consequent reluctance by the company to release volunteers based at the Walsall exchange. Another employee felt that the company was experiencing problems because it had already released too many experienced people, while its training for the last ten years had been inadequate, consequently not raising the competence of other employees to replace them. "Rationalisation", said one participant, "in my experience always means redundancies."

A participant remarked, in the context of discussion of redundancies and unfavourable comparison of BT's employees per connection with the figures for Japanese and American companies, that the article was now out of date because of a "philosophy change" in BT from "statistics" to "customer satisfaction". Improvements in objective features of service such as reduction in faults and the speed with which repairs were carried out had not been matched by an improvement in customer perception of the company's performance, and the latter had now become the company main focus.

I then asked the participants to comment on specific linguistic features, beginning with the use of the first person singular, and suggesting that it was

unusual for the words 'I' and 'me' to be used only three times in a letter of this length. One participant felt that in using the first person singular the author was seeking to give a "personal touch". This participant did not believe that Mr Earnshaw had written the letter, and therefore construed the use of the first person as fraudulent. Someone suggested that if Mr Earnshaw were like other BT managers he would be unable to string a sentence together, but the senior representative participant, who had met Mr Earnshaw, said that he was very articulate. The retired participant added:

> Well, he's only using it in the sense that he's the writer of the letter, because he's actually throwing everything back on the 'we', isn't he? The 'I' is only used to mention that 'we' are going to do something.

I then moved on to ask about Mr Earnshaw's much more frequent use of the first person plural. The immediate response was to see this as:

> trying to maintain that we're a team, and that we're involved with this as well. Well, we're not.

The same participant felt that Mr Earnshaw was "trying to appear that he's on our side", to which another person responded, "But he's up against it!" Several participants added sarcastic "quotations", some citing actual words from the letter, which they attributed to Mr Earnshaw, imagining him saying "I'm very sorry.... I'll do my best for you..."

I went on to ask who 'we' were in the letter. The first response was:

> Well, he's trying to make out it's the organization, the whole lot, everybody (*murmurs of dissent from at least one other participant*) He's not talking about management; he's talking about everybody.

Another member thought he was speaking as if there were "some sort of committee".

I asked the group to consider some specific examples, beginning with the reference in the opening paragraph to "something of which we can all be proud". The immediate response was:

> Well definitely that's totally inclusive, isn't it?

(Neither this participant nor any other was familiar with the expression "inclusive 'we'" as a technical term of grammar.) Other participants added comments such as "That's all of us, yeah"; "That's everybody who works for the company". I then drew attention to the usage in "To remain successful we face some difficult decisions." A participant immediately responded, "Yeah, that's not us." This was greeted by sympathetic laughter from other members of the group. I said that I wasn't so sure about this usage, and other participants responded, "It's a bit ambiguous, isn't it?" and "It's not such a large 'we'." A participant said that in this case 'we' was being used to refer to decisions that the board was going to take, while another person defined 'we' as "him and his secretary".

Turning to the final paragraph's usage of 'we' in "We face some exciting but tough challenges in the coming twelve months and I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring attitude to our people", I asked, "Who are 'we' there?" The group had no difficulty in deciding that 'we' was being used inclusively on its first occurrence, but exclusively later in the sentence. A participant remarked:

> Where it starts off by saying "we face some exciting but tough challenges", I mean, that's all of us again, I think, you know, but then later he moves on to "we will maintain a constructive and caring approach" that's clearly, that's got to be the leaders of the company as opposed to the bulk of the staff. It's also a lie!

Another participant pointed out that the sentence could also be construed exclusively to mean 'we, the management' throughout. The retired participant saw the article as using 'we' to give the impression that "you were involved

yourself". He added, "He quite cleverly switches between his 'we's to give the impression that everybody's involved."

When a participant pointed out that "the second 'we' can't include us because it ends with 'our people'" I asked what the group made of Mr Earnshaw's use of this terminology to refer to his subordinates. The senior representative J said that he had specifically advised the company against this usage, which he described as "cynical". Another participant added, "as though they're looking after you." Reaction to the use of the terminology was uniformly negative across the focus group. "Most of the members don't feel like 'our people'", said the senior representative, but the phrase was now "mandatory".

I then asked the participants to look at the third sentence of paragraph 3, suggesting that it might be alternatively worded thus:

> The management will recruit less people than leave the company through retirement and will cut spending on overtime, agency and contract labour. The company will actively help employees to reskill. The company will then, management hopes, need to make as few people as possible voluntarily redundant.

I asked what would be the effect of this change. A participant responded, "You're saying the same thing, but the only thing about it is, you're being more definite." The language actually used was seen as "welfare officer-speak". When asked why the management had preferred the form of words actually used in the letter, a member of the group replied, "Well your form of words make it clear who's doing it, don't they?" The sentence was, in any event, seen retrospectively as "a pack of lies", because recruitment was already minimal and there had been no reduction in overtime or in agency and contract labour. Nor had there been any real attempt at reskilling.

I asked the group to consider the possibility of rewording Mr Earnshaw's statement that the company retained the final decision about acceptance of volunteers for redundancy as "The management will decide who goes", and changing "I must stress that we can give no guarantees" to "We can guarantee nothing". When I asked what difference this would make, after initial laughter, members responded that it would make a "considerable" difference, "a different impression entirely" and "an element of despondency among the staff". General comments followed about management "bullshit" and the use of "flowery language to avoid saying it's crap". The avoidance of attributing agency was compared with saying to someone whose father you had murdered, "Unfortunately your father has been murdered" and thus absolving yourself of responsibility. It was also compared with the usual politenesses of giving bad news.

I asked if the letter indicated that the company had any obligation to take particular action. The letter was seen as not accepting any responsibility that would be legally enforceable, while giving an appearance of concern to the cursory reader.

6.4.3 The control article

The control article used was Mr Cobbe's piece in *GPT Challenge*. The group were able to decode this piece, despite having seen it for the first time only at the beginning of the meeting, and took some pleasure in doing so.

Immediate responses were that Mr Cobbe was "trying to throw the responsibility on to" his subordinates, and that he was "abrogating his responsibility for the running of the business. He's saying, 'It's up to you to do it.'" Another participant referred to the "staggering bit in the middle" about additional skills:

> And then, he makes it clear right in the middle that it's not their intention to do it by training courses. You know, you've got to get reskilled on your

> own by some mysterious method. Because training courses take days to do.

There was cynicism about learning on the job.

The response to the question "Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?" was clearly seen to be "It's yours". Another participant paraphrased:

> You can't rely on the training people to do it for you, you know, you can't rely, you can't leave it solely to the training departments.

The participants were naturally substituting 'you' for 'we' when the latter was used as the disguised second person. The group perceived an "ulterior motive" in Mr Cobbe's reference to flexibility and cross-functional job moves. Participants were cynical about "your challenge (of) reaching your full potential" and the company's "challenge (of) making use of that potential", noting that there was no reference to the company making any contribution to the development of employees' potential. The company was seen as "exploiting" employees' potential. The company was believed to be saying "You're on your own, mate" to its employees.

Mr Cobbe's commitment to IIP status was seen as implying that the company had a role in achieving this, "but the rest's saying, 'It's all up to you.'"

The meeting concluded with further doubt cast on whether either Mr Earnshaw or Mr Cobbe had written the articles attributed to them, and with another reference to the disposal of company magazines unread.

6.4.4 BT focus group - conclusions

Of the four groups, this was the most ready to speak explicitly about linguistic matters, and also showed the greatest understanding of the control text from another employer. It was also noticeable that the participants' attitude to the

company's communication was more negative than might have been expected from the earlier interview with the senior representative J.

The common themes emerged once again in this group. The participants claimed that company magazines were discarded unread, and additionally that even letters sent to employees' homes were similarly thrown away. Team briefings were perceived as an attempt at management control, and were considered useless to employees, who (in contrast with the group at GPT Liverpool) had to be pressed to attend, often preferring to find some urgent job as an excuse for non-attendance. A new feature in the BT group was the claim that people who asked awkward questions at team briefings could face reprisals in appraisal. Tardy or non-existent responses were also once again reported by this group. As in GPT, participants reported the introduction of new schemes with a fanfare of publicity, followed by their subsequent quiet demise. Cynicism about the message contained in the letter which was the subject of discussion twice led members of the group to describe is as "a pack of lies".

This group was the only one specifically to raise the issue of Japanization, and they mentioned the question of "jargon" such as "involvement" in this context before I had asked them to consider linguistic matters. The group also volunteered that they were unconvinced by appeals to technical developments as the reason for change, seeing instead the hand of the City and the demand for greater shareholder value.

When asked to look at Mr Earnshaw's letter, the group demonstrated a high linguistic competence, immediately discerning differences between the paragraphs, trying to "build you up as part of the company" before breaking bad news. (The group also recognised this as part of a normal polite usage.) They rapidly recognised that the letter was "trying to make (voluntary redundancy)

your idea", passing responsibility from management to employees. Similarly, Mr Earnshaw's use of 'I' was decoded as a false and transitory acceptance of responsibility, because it was immediately used to "throw everything back on the 'we'". This decoding was strengthened by the belief of some participants that Mr Earnshaw had not written the letter himself. The unprompted questioning of the veracity of attributed authorship was again unique to this group.

The first person plural was interpreted as appealing to a specious common interest between company and employees. The participants were readily able to distinguish inclusive and exclusive uses (one of them using the term "inclusive" without any prompting), and complexities of usage were confidently recognised - most notably the use of probably inclusive 'we' and certainly exclusive 'we' and 'our' in the same sentence. Use by management of the term "our people" in referring to their subordinates was not considered appropriate.

When asked to examine forms of language which tended to disguise agency, by comparing the actual text with an alternative version in the active voice, the group were able to see that the version in the active voice "makes it clear who's doing it". The participants accused the company of "bullshit" and of "using flowery language to avoid saying it's crap". The letter was generally perceived as giving an appearance of concern while avoiding any commitment which might be legally enforceable.

The examination of the control article, Mr Cobbe's article from *GPT Challenge*, revealed a remarkable ability by the participants to decode an item from another company. Overwhelmingly, the impression was that Mr Cobbe was seeking to "abrogate responsibility" and to pass responsibility for training to the individual. Particularly noteworthy was the way in which participants, when citing the passage in the centre of the article which emphasised the need for employees to

take responsibility for their own career, automatically transposed 'you' for Mr Cobbe's 'we', readily decoding this as a use of the disguised second person. GPT was perceived to be "exploiting" the potential of its employees, and to be saying, "You're on your own, mate."

Chapter 7 Discussion of findings

7.1 Summary of findings

All three companies were found to deploy a range of techniques for communication with employees. Some, such as company magazines or newspapers and employee briefings, were found across the three companies. Video, by contrast, had only a limited use or impact in BT and GPT, but was used widely in the Royal Mail, albeit with a strongly negative impact, according to both the senior lay trade union officials who were interviewed and the members of the Royal Mail focus group. Quality circles were reported to have gone out of fashion in all three companies since the turn of the decade.

Linguistic analysis of specific examples of written communication yielded interesting findings. In all three companies, potential dichotomies and conflicts were found to be encoded linguistically. This went far beyond the use of a managerial lexicon or "buzzwords", extending into the syntactic structure of the language. In two of the three companies, BT and the Royal Mail, the chosen items of communication dealt explicitly with obviously contentious matters: potential job reductions and industrial action respectively. In the case of GPT, the articles examined were about the less overtly conflictual issue of training. Among the aspects of language examined were:

- transitivity and transformation, often used to avoid attributing responsibility for potentially controversial matters, such as dismissals, to human agency;
- modality, used for example to impose obligation on workers or to present actions potentially harmful to the interests of employees as something which the company "has to" do;
- the first person plural, often used to appeal to a common interest which 'we' share.

In the last case, I have suggested that linguistics needs to take account of a disguised second person, where the first person plural is used, often with a modality of obligation, to impose responsibility upon an audience with which the author falsely purports to identify by the use of 'we'.

Focus group discussions investigated employees' reception of corporate communication. On the face of it, there is little for the comfort of employers in the responses, which revealed an overwhelmingly negative response. In all three companies, responses showed recurring features:

- claims that many employees discarded company publications unread or after only cursory examination;
- complaints that team briefings contained irrelevant material or omitted relevant material because of divisions or a lack of understanding among managers;
- complaints of "one-way" briefings with late, inadequate or non-existent feedback;
- suspicion of "bullshitting";
- belief that new methods of communication constituted attempts to exclude or bypass trade unions.

When asked to comment upon specific articles of written communication from their employer, focus group members exhibited a sophisticated linguistic competence in decoding the material. In every case, members of the focus groups were able to recognise underlying contradictions and dichotomies. However, two differences were apparent in the ability or willingness of participants to make explicit the linguistic process by which they decoded the material:

- It was evident that participants felt far more comfortable in speaking about some aspects of linguistic structures than others. Lexical matters ("buzzwords") and the use of the first person plural were discussed readily,

and in some cases were introduced into the discussion without any prompting by the researcher. Transitivity, transformation and modality were less readily discussed, although questions involving "retransformation" revealed that participants implicitly understood the techniques. The participants, who had no formal linguistic training, perhaps felt more comfortable in discussing those aspects of grammar which they had learned about in English lessons at school.

- BT and Royal Mail participants were far more willing than their GPT colleagues, especially those from Coventry, to make explicit their linguistic knowledge. Coventry participants, and to a lesser extent those from Liverpool, normally responded even to a direct question about a linguistic matter with an answer which looked beyond the issue I wished to discuss to an underlying aspect of industrial relations. I concluded that this was likely to be a result of the participants' previous relationship with me as a senior representative. At a subsequent meeting, Coventry participant G confirmed that this was in fact the case.

Each focus group meeting ended with a brief discussion of a text (the "control text") from the communication of another company. It was found that the ability to decode this text in a similar way to its target audience did not correlate with evidence of explicit linguistic knowledge. Instead, this seemed to depend more upon similarity of working environment, with BT and GPT focus groups finding it much easier to assess communication from one another's employer than GPT and Royal Mail employees. This, I suggest, indicates the importance of experience in interpretation and decoding of corporate communication. However, I suggest that the negative results may also be influenced by the possibility that the group of postal workers thought that they were being asked to analyse a contrasting piece of "good" communication and by GPT workers' knowledge of

the rejection of a proposed settlement by the CWU, which they interpreted as an attempted "sell-out" by the union leadership.

Participants' level of formal education did not have any effect upon their ability to decode corporate communication. Paradoxically, the Coventry group, with its high proportion of graduates, was less willing than any other to make explicit the linguistic process by which it interpreted items of communication, but I have interpreted this rather as a result of their previous acquaintance with me than as a result of their generally higher level of education. The only significant feature attributable to the higher level of academic qualification of the Coventry group was a slight and ambiguous tendency to believe in the concept of the career.

Women and men did not show differences in interpretation. Ethnic minorities were not represented among the groups except for Irish people, who were present in all groups, and one Latin American participant. No conclusions can therefore be drawn about differences of interpretation on ethnic grounds. The only participant who spoke English as a foreign language appeared to have no difficulty in interpreting material.

Perhaps surprisingly, differing trade union traditions and levels of militancy had no apparent influence on employees' interpretation of corporate communication. The response of the postal workers, who had recently been on strike, was negative, but no more so than that of their colleagues in other companies. Again, the focus group in GPT's traditionally placid Coventry site criticised the same aspects of the company's communication as their historically much more militant Liverpool colleagues with equal robustness and sometimes in the same words. Even Liverpool had seen little industrial action in recent years, however. The absence of industrial action in two of three companies and three out of four sites may perhaps support Willmott's suggestion (1993) that modern management

methods may induce compliance by providing a "safety valve" for employee dissatisfaction. However, the action in the Royal Mail may indicate that there are limits to this process. More generally, the negative responses in all three companies certainly do not give any impression that corporate communication is winning hearts and minds or inducing employees to "own" their employers' business agenda.

7.2 Viability of the study

The present study has been modest in its scope, interviewing only a very small proportion of employees in three very large organisations. However, since its methodology has been entirely qualitative and its focus upon the *process* by which employees decode corporate communication, the quantitative limitation of my sample is of lessened relevance. Indeed, the amount of data arising from each focus group, and the need to analyse and present it in some detail, has made a small scale project inevitable within the scope available in this thesis. In the case of that part of the research which concentrates on my own analysis of linguistic elements of corporate communication, sample size is not an issue.

As regards questions of representativeness, I have acknowledged my reliance upon trade union contacts for the recruitment of the focus groups. Two of the focus groups (GPT Liverpool and BT) met immediately after trade union meetings at which the participants had been present, while the Royal Mail group met in the union office on employer premises and consisted of employees permitted to absent themselves from work for trade union activities. All participants were volunteers. It may perhaps appear that Martin's criticism of qualitative differentiation studies might be applied to the present work:

> These samples are therefore potentially biased in several ways. The organizations studied tend to be rigidly stratified (large bureaucracies and manufacturing plants for example). The work groups investigated tend to

> be relatively low status, with concomitant low pay and intrinsically less satisfying tasks. Informants may be deviants - for example, unusually garrulous and more likely to express discontent. Qualitative Differentiation studies seek a point of view that is different from that espoused by top management. They look where they are most likely to find it. (1992: p 107)

I would defend the present research against this potential criticism in two ways.

In part, Martin's criticism is quite simply true. The companies studied *are* large bureaucracies or manufacturing plants. The employees who participated, even the graduate engineers at GPT Coventry, *were* relatively low in the corporate pecking order. The action of volunteering to participate, in response to a request transmitted through a senior union representative, at least implied a more robust "union" stance than that of the average employee. However, I would argue that employees in lower levels of the corporate hierarchy, whose point of view does not necessarily concur with that of top management, are precisely the people who are targeted by corporate communication, and their response to that communication is the legitimate focus of the present research. Again, it could be argued that "deviants" are the potential audience whom corporate communication most needs to persuade.

Secondly, even if the participants were more likely to take an oppositional stance than the "average" employee of their company, I would argue that the *process* by which they decode corporate communication can be generalised. For example, the degree to which employees see themselves as part of authorial 'us' (i.e. construing 'we' as inclusive) may vary, but the study demonstrates clearly that readers can potentially decode the first person plural in several ways. Meanings are widely available as accounts in workplace cultures, and there is no lack of representativeness in terms of linguistic training or its absence, since the participants had no more formal training in the discipline than their colleagues.

Another potential criticism of the present work might lie in its implicit comparison of an academic linguistic analysis with the experientially focused linguistic competence of participants. I am aware that this might give the impression of awarding a "mark out of ten" depending on how closely a focus group's interpretation tallies with my own linguistic analysis. This is not the intention of the research, which seeks rather to celebrate the rich linguistic ability of the participants, anchored in their work situation. However I suggest that a detour into available formal knowledge, and its privileged access to the workings of language, allows us to produce an in-depth picture, and that this knowledge might usefully be employed by trade unionists seeking to engage with professional corporate communication.

I hope that the research has been innovative in two major respects. While close linguistic analysis has been applied for many years to general news media, there has been a perhaps surprising failure to apply it to corporate media. The present research has done so, and has found evidence of deep linguistic encoding of potentially divisive matters beneath a sometimes bland surface in which conflict is not overtly acknowledged. the application of linguistic analysis may well prove useful for practitioners in industrial relations, especially perhaps trade union officials who need to respond to corporate communication.

Again, the use of focus group interviews is innovative in research into corporate communication. This proved a rich source for information, with the interplay between participants offering valuable insights which might not readily have been available to an "outside" researcher interviewing employees individually. Among other things, it has allowed an element of methodological reflexivity, based as it was in part upon the mutual knowledge of researcher and subjects.

7.3 Possibilities for future research

Languages other than English

Perhaps one obvious question raised by this research is the extent to which it can be generalised to languages other than English, which may lack features present in English (e.g. nominalization) or make use of features no longer present in English usage (e.g. subjunctive mood, gender). I shall briefly explore this possibility with regard to two elements: the implications for research in languages which have grammatical gender and those which normally omit pronouns.

English lacks **grammatical gender.** Third person pronouns and the small number of job designations which have a "masculine" and "feminine" variant (e.g. waiter/waitress) refer unequivocally to sex. By contrast, other European languages have nouns with grammatical gender unrelated to sex, requiring adjectives and pronouns in agreement. Thus, in French 'la sentinelle' is feminine, although the soldier delegated to this duty would probably (and until recently certainly) be a man. Italian has no problem with 'il soprano romano Cecilia Bartoli', although, like almost all living adult sopranos, she is a woman. Spanish, however, makes the masculine noun 'modelo' feminine when it refers to a female photographic model. Gendered languages may have a feminine form for occupations, so that a female lecturer may be 'una professoressa' or 'eine Dozentin'. Within the last year, the French government has found itself in conflict with the Académie Française over a proposal that the masculine nouns 'maire' and 'ministre' should henceforth take masculine or feminine gender depending on the sex of the holder of the office so that civil servants should address a female member of the cabinet as 'Madame la Ministre' rather than 'le

Ministre'. A gendered language presents a range of options, and potential gaffes, not present in English.

The first person plural is ideologically significant in English, and plays an important role in corporate communication. Is the same ideological role present in **"pronoun dropping" languages**, where the pronoun may be, and frequently is, omitted? In some European languages, notably Italian and Spanish, the first person plural is still explicitly indicated by the inflection of the verb. In Japanese, while pronouns may be dropped, there exists no inflexion of the verb to indicate the number and person. Japanese does, however, possess a special form of the first person plural (*wareware*, rather than the normal, and commonly omitted, *watashitachi*) for use when the purpose is to establish 'our' solidarity. These linguistic differences may well be of interest to researchers into language used for business purposes and to researchers operating in countries where those languages are used. Such comparative research might be of particular interest to researchers in countries or situations where companies need to address a bilingual or multilingual workforce, as in Belgium, Switzerland or Catalonia.

The acquisition of managerial language

The focus of the present research has been upon the reception and decoding of corporate communication by its intended audience. However, the encoding of messages by managerial authors is also potentially interesting and worthy of further research. An interview with a personnel manager which formed part of the research cast only limited light on the process by which managers acquire the particular vocabulary and syntax which predominate in corporate communication. The manager attributed the acquisition of "buzzwords" to fashion and to the influence of senior managers. In response to a direct question he said categorically that in his experience managers were not given training in

the use of language for communication with subordinates. In the absence of such training, it would be useful to research the manner in which managers acquire not only a management vocabulary but syntactic features such as the use of transformation and transitivity to distance themselves from potentially unpopular decisions.

Other areas of linguistics

This work indicates the possibility of further research into:

- linguistics and conflict;
- the relationship of critical linguistics and sociolinguistics;
- further development of the analysis of the first person plural - the "disguised second person" and "disguised third person".

Extension to other environments

I have conceded the partial validity of Martin's critique (1992) of differentiation research in relation to the present work. It would be useful if future research could apply the methodology I have used here to other environments. These might reasonably include:

- smaller companies, rather than "manufacturing plants and large bureaucracies";
- non-unionised companies;
- Japanese-owned companies, in Japan and overseas;
- companies in other sectors, such as financial services and retail.

Such an extension of the research would test how widely its findings can be generalised to other types of company and different work situations.

Trade union communication

The present research has only tangentially considered trade union communication. However, the limited discussion of union communication which took place during the course of the research does indicate that it may be a fruitful field for further work.

One obvious area for future research might be the viability of training for professional officers and lay activists in the decoding of corporate communication, which could perhaps be a useful weapon in the armoury of trade unions when countering what they perceive as inaccurate or misleading communication.

A further area of research, again with possibly beneficial consequences for trade unions, would be the unions' own communication with their members, potential

members and possible allies. Lay activists' criticism of their union's communication encountered during the research included:

- excessive reliance upon professional journalists to the exclusion of material from rank and file members;
- use of union journals as a publicity vehicle for senior professional officials;
- irrelevance of material to members;
- union magazines not being read by members.

It also became apparent from reading of union journals and viewing the MSF video, *MSF at Work* (also the title of the union journal) that union communication could contain inherent contradictions not dissimilar to those found in employer-produced communication. For example, the video was aimed primarily at an audience of potential recruits to the union, but relied for its distribution upon lay activists. It consequently exhibited certain tensions between the assumed interests of the potential members and those of the activists who needed to be persuaded to distribute it.

Further research into these areas would, I believe, be potentially useful in throwing light upon the role of communication in the labour process.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Electronic communication

I was, of course unable, to access companies' internal e-mail, and evidence for the scanty use of this method of communication was gleaned entirely from the interviews reported in the main body of the text.

I did not expect to find much use of websites aimed at a company's own employees. This was confirmed by an initial study of websites in April 1996, followed up by subsequent visits to the websites of the three companies in the case studies during the rest of the research period. The survey was carried out by using the Lycos search engine to find company names, and surveying the contents of any site found which was maintained by that company.

In general, the approach was a random selection of major companies; the only exceptions were (1) the deliberate inclusion of the companies which formed the case studies, and (2) the deliberate inclusion of six companies where current or very recent industrial disputes had been the subject of websites maintained by trade unions or similar worker organizations. In total, sites maintained by 29 companies were examined, and a search for a further three companies achieved a negative response.

Some sites were aimed solely at a customer audience. This was the case, for example, for the sites maintained in the United States by the Goodyear and Dunlop tyre companies and by Jaguar Cars, for the British site maintained by British Gas North-West, and for the sites maintained in several countries by Nissan. Perhaps the most obvious cases of sites where the company's workers were not part of the intended audience were the sites maintained by Sony in Japan and Siemens in Germany, entirely in the English language.

Sony aimed part of its sites at potential subcontractors for components, while potential recruits were among the target audience of several sites. Boeing's and BT's sites included job opportunities, while Ford had a substantial amount of material aimed at recruiting "the best and the brightest from leading universities all over the world". This material was, as this quotation implies, aimed at potential graduate recruits. This may be a realistic assessment of the greater likelihood of such recruits using the Internet as a source of job information than potential assembly line workers. One minor surprise was to find a website maintained (in English) by a Stuttgart school which was more informative about Mercedes than the company's official site.

The only apparent exception to this general rule that websites were not aimed at the company's own workforce was BT (British Telecom). The company's research laboratories' section of the site included an online version of the company's technical journal. An oddity revealed by the use of a web search engine to locate this site by using the keywords "British Telecom" was that the longer form of the name had been used in the URL of a site highly critical of the company's business methods. Thus, anyone searching for the site would find robust criticism of the company before locating its official site.

Six cases - Tate & Lyle; Staley; Mersey Docks and Harbour Company; Caterpillar; Boeing and the *Detroit News* - were deliberately chosen because there had been recent industrial disputes at the companies, two of which were still continuing in April 1996. In each case, the disputes had been the subject of considerable interest on the Internet, with unions or other sympathetic bodies setting up websites in support of the workers involved. Tate & Lyle had undergone strikes both in Britain and at its American subsidiary, Staley. Staley had no website of its own, and the parent company's website made no reference to the disputes, which had ended with the defeat of the striking workers. Neither

Caterpillar nor the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company appeared to have a website. Boeing referred to the effect of the strike on profits in its third and fourth quarter reports for 1995, and issued a press release on the eventual settlement of the dispute, all of which were available on the company's website. At the time of examination, there was no material aimed at convincing workers to refrain from striking or to return to work. During the dispute, the union website had included a link to the company's site, and a challenge for the company to return the compliment. The *Detroit News* website covered the strike in some detail, as did the rival online newspaper, the *Detroit Journal*, produced by striking workers. While the viewpoint of the two online newspapers was diametrically opposed, it would be difficult to argue that the online version of the *Detroit News* was aimed explicitly at the company's striking former workforce. The much greater use of the Internet by trade unions during industrial disputes can perhaps be attributed to their greater need to convince others of the justice of their cause. This was certainly the case in the Detroit newspaper case, where subscribers and advertisers were lobbied to boycott the newspapers produced by strike-breakers. In the case of the Liverpool dockers, they needed to achieve solidarity action in foreign ports, urging dockers not to handle ships going to or coming from Liverpool.

Appendix 2 Questionnaire re. union organization

UNION ORGANIZATION

1. Are unions recognised in the workplace? If so, which unions are recognised for:

managers?

technical staff?

clerical workers?

manual workers?

2. Is recognition just for representational purposes, or do you also have collective bargaining rights?

3. If you only have representational rights, have you previously had collective bargaining rights?

4. If you answered yes to question 3, is this the result of the formal withdrawal by the employer of collective bargaining rights, or have they just fallen into disuse because of the introduction by the company of methods of individual payment?

5. Which unions have members in the workplace?

6. Could you indicate the approximate levels of membership of the union(s) for the following broad categories of worker, and whether the union is recognised to represent them.

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF WKRS	% MEMBERSHIP OF UNION	RECOGNISED?
Managers			
Technical			
Clerical			
Manual			

7. What main changes have you noticed in the company/organization over the last 5 years?

Please add sheets as necessary!

Thank you for your help.

Appendix 3 Questionnaire re. employee involvement

EI Questionnaire

Company name:

Interviewee(s):

1. DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION

Do the following forms of communication exist in the company? If they do, please answer other questions, too.

Company newspaper Yes/No

If yes:
Is there just one publication, or several?

When was it introduced?

If several, on what basis - e.g. divisional, geographical?

How often does the newspaper appear?

Who produces it?

What do shop stewards/workers think of it?

Company videos/audio tapes Yes/No/Which?

When were they introduced?

In what circumstances do workers see/listen to them?

Is there an opportunity for feedback/questions to management? If so, what form does that take?

What do workers/shop stewards think of the videos or audio cassettes?

Employee report Yes/No

If yes, is it widely read/discussed among employees?

Briefing system Yes/No

When was it introduced?

At what level does briefing take place?

Is the briefing "selective" for each area? If so, how does a briefing vary from area to area?

Is there a formal trade union presence in the briefing? (e.g. Presence of a TU official in that capacity and not just because he/she happens to work in the department being briefed?)

What do workers/stewards think of the content/effectiveness of briefings? Does this depend upon the individual manager or supervisor giving the briefing?

Trade union response Yes/No

How does the trade union respond to the company's use of these methods:

section meetings;

mass meetings;

leaflets/newsletters;

other methods?

Please say a bit more about the union response, e.g. whether leaflets are regularly produced or on an ad hoc basis; whether they are jointly produced or produced by individual unions?

2. UPWARD PROBLEM SOLVING

Which, if any, of the following systems are used?

Suggestion scheme Yes/No

If so, how does it work, and how are successful suggestions rewarded?

Attitude survey Yes/No

If so, are surveys carried out on a regular or ad hoc basis? How are they regarded by employees?

Quality circles Yes/No

How widespread are quality circles within the company/organization?

When were they introduced?

What proportion of employees participate?

What is the attitude of unions/workers towards quality circles?

Total Quality Management/customer care schemes Yes/No

If they exist, please give brief details. When were they introduced?

What is the attitude of stewards and workers towards these schemes?

3. FINANCIAL EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

Please briefly detail any schemes which exist to persuade employees by financial means to identify with the company. For example, do any of the following exist?

FEATURE	MGRS	TECH	CLER	MANU
Individual bonuses				
Performance-related pay				
Share options				
Share purchase scheme				
Profit sharing				
Unit bonuses				

Please give any further detail about any of the above schemes which you think is relevant.

What is the attitude of workers and stewards towards any such schemes of financial involvement?

4. REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

Do any of the following exist within the company/organization?

Joint Consultative Committee or Works Council Yes/No

If so, at what level or levels within the company/organization?

Is employee membership restricted to trade union representatives? If not, how are employee members chosen?

Collective bargaining Yes/No

If so, at what level within the company is bargaining carried out?

Has the introduction of any of the forms of employee involvement which we have discussed had any effect on collective bargaining? For example, if financial employee involvement has been

introduced, has it had any effect on the company's attitude towards collective bargaining on pay, or the ability of unions to negotiate? Please tell me about it.

Change programme Yes/No

Has the company introduced a "change programme". If you are not familiar with this term, a recent Employment Department document defines it as: "a programme normally associated with a new mission statement often including a strong emphasis on communication and intended to change the existing culture to, for example, a more market-driven one".

If so, can you please give details.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations expanded or explained in the text are omitted, unless frequently used after their initial introduction.

AEEU	Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (British trade union)
Apex	Association of Professional, Executive and Computer Staffs (British trade union, now white-collar section of GMB)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BS3750	British Standard regarding quality control procedures
BT	British company, formerly British Telecom
CAD	Computer-aided design
CAMI	Canadian car plant, abbreviation not expanded in source
CAW	Canadian Auto Workers (trade union)
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CWU	Communication Workers' Union (British trade union)
EI	Employee involvement
EU	European Union
Fiat	Fabbrica italiana di automobili, Torino (Italian car and truck maker)
GEC	General Electric Company (British company, parent of GPT)
GMB	British trade union, formerly General, Municipal and Boilermakers
GPT	British company, formerly GEC Plessey Telecommunications
ICI	British company, formerly Imperial Chemical Industries
IIP	Investors in People
ISO9000	International standard regarding quality control procedures
ISR	International Survey Research, Ltd
JCC	Joint Consultative
JIT	Just-in-time (production method)
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (British trade union)
NCB	National Coal Board (former nationalised mining company)
NSG	Networks Systems Group, former business division of GPT
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers (British trade union)
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
N&S	Networks and Systems, business division of BT
OU	Open University
PCB	Printed circuit board
PNG	Public Networks Group, division of GPT, formed by merger of
NSG	and TSG
PRP	Performance related pay
STC	Standard Telephones and Cables (British company)
STE	Society of Telecom Executives (British trade union)
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union (British trade union)
TI	Texas Instruments (American company)
TQC	Total quality control

TQM	Total quality management
TSG	Telecommunications Systems Group, former business division of GPT
TURC	Trade union resource centre
UAW	United Auto Workers (American trade union)
URL	Universal resource location - electronic "address" of a page on the world-wide web
VCR	Video cassette recorder